THE INSPECTOR GEORGE GENTLY CASE FILES

GENTLY SINKING

Alan Hunter

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Alan Hunter was born in Hoveton, Norfolk in 1922. He left school at the age of fourteen to work on his father's farm, spending his spare time sailing on the Norfolk Broads and writing nature notes for the *Eastern Evening News*. He also wrote poetry, some of which was published while he was in the RAF during the Second World War. By 1950, he was running his own bookshop in Norwich. In 1955, the first of what would become a series of forty-six George Gently novels was published. He died in 2005, aged eighty-two.

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Alan Hunter

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious; the locale is sketched from life.

Now I ain't no more than a little girl,
I hear the sea and I want to cry.

Sarah's Calypso

When the SS *Naxos Island*, a floating sieve on charter to one Thomas Blackburn of London and homeward bound from Kingston, Jamaica, went to the bottom of the Channel, she took a few tons of sugar with her. But not everything sinks so easily; and some things pay better than sugar. Quite soon the bodies started coming ashore – twenty-two illegal immigrants. At £250 a head. Tax free.

Thomas Blackburn got away with it, briefly. Two weeks later he was dead, with a cheap sheath knife stuck in his back. He was in bed, and he hadn't been alone. A very ordinary, very sordid little murder – but for the *Naxos Island* incident. The Chief Inspector on the spot was Tallent, and he was good. But rough. He called a spade a spade, and in the West Indian colony in west London where Blackburn had lived that was a very dirty word. If Tallent raised his voice that would be brutality, racial discrimination, the end of a valuable career. The Yard wanted a super-policeman to clear this mess up: an angel of tact, patience and tolerance, with a mind like a razor. Chief Superintendent Gently.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SS *NAXOS ISLAND* was a cargo vessel of 3,500 tons. She was built on the Tyne in 1921. She was owned by a Greek shipping company called Europa Maritime. She was registered in Panama. She had a German captain, Greek officers and a Portuguese crew of eight. She was on charter to a London import-export agency run by one Thomas Blackburn. She was plying between Kingston, Jamaica, and West India Dock, London. She carried sugar to London and mixed cargoes to Kingston. She made ten to twelve trips annually. She could be represented as seaworthy.

On 1 October 1967 the Bergen Line MS *Venus*, returning from an autumn cruise to the Canary Islands, was proceeding up-Channel in a full SW gale. At 0217 hours she picked up distress signals from a vessel identifying herself as the *Naxos Island* and giving a position 25 miles SSE of Start Point. The *Venus* was 40 miles SW of Start Point and running at reduced speed because of heavy seas. She put out a general call. The call was received by two vessels in the near neighbourhood of the *Naxos Island.* One of these, the Jason Line MS *Matilda,* was within seven miles of the given position. She altered course immediately. She saw a number of distress rockets. When she reached the position she encountered oil and floating wreckage and discovered a waterlogged lifeboat. She picked up a survivor from the lifeboat. He gave his name as Soloman Lord Roberts of Kingston, Jamaica. He was black. He was not of the known complement of the *Naxos Island.* Three other bodies, presumed to come from the wreck, were washed ashore during the week following at Beesands and Strete, in Start Bay. One was identified as the Captain, Carl Ritter. The other two were Afro-Caribbean.

Soloman Lord Roberts was landed at Plymouth and met there by the immigration authorities. As a result of his interrogation police action was taken in both Kingston, Jamaica, and London. In Kingston, Jamaica, police raided the office of Hamish McClure, Thomas Blackburn's corresponding agent, finding nothing but meticulous records of legitimate trading activity. In London they raided Blackburn's office in Hale Street, Poplar. There they found records exactly corresponding to Hamish McClure's. McClure and Blackburn, and Blackburn's two partners, James Osgood and Frederick Grey, emphatically denied all knowledge of illegal immigrant traffic. Blackburn suggested Ritter was responsible. Ritter's character was known to be equivocal. Soloman Lord Roberts confirmed that Ritter had been one of his contacts in Kingston.

Meanwhile Europa Maritime claimed insurance and Blackburn negotiated a fresh charter.

On 18 October he was found dead in his flat in Chiswick. A cheap sheath-knife had been thrust in his back. There were no prints on the handle.

The body was naked and lay on the bed. A short while before death he'd been with a woman.

The case interested the Home Office.

They suggested Gently should be put in charge.

'You stay, Gently.'

The Assistant Commissioner (Crime) poked a finger at the chair from which Gently was rising. It was the morning conference of 19 October, and Gently had chosen a seat next to the door. Nine times out of ten he'd have slipped through that door before the AC spotted him . . . today, he'd guessed it wouldn't work, and it didn't. Slowly, he sat again.

Outside it was raining. Through the huge, naked window one looked down at faintly gleaming roofs. From the AC's new office you could still see the Thames, though no longer the cliffs of County Hall.

The Thames was ebbing, fast and yellow, shouldering by the piers of the bridges. A dark police-launch with a dragging pennant was sliding over the tide upstream. The same Thames as at Whitehall, yet here . . . more distant.

Inside, the office smelt of new paint and new furnishings, while the AC still hadn't got round to unpacking his college photographs. The window was too large, you looked down too far. People below in the streets were computer dots, the cars dashes.

And of course . . . rain. London, England, 19 October.

'You've done your homework?' the AC asked, when the door closed behind the last policeman.

'Yes.' Gently touched his file.

'Good. Then you'll know what I'm going to ask you.'

'I've an idea.'

'We have to check, that's pretty obvious in the circs. And the truth, mind. No black mark if you're pulled off the case for being honest.'

Gently stared empty-faced at yellow-grey sky over Bankside.

'Because everyone's so certain—'

'The Home Office is – and so am I.'

'White people also use knives.'

'So do chefs and Boy Scouts. But get it out of your head, if it was ever there, that Blackburn was killed by a white person. He was running that racket. A score of immigrants, maybe more, went down in his ship. The *Naxos Island* was rotten. She wasn't properly insured. Blackburn knew about that. And we couldn't touch him. So the immigrants fixed it – and between ourselves, not much grief.'

Gently shrugged. 'Simple.'

'Oh, it's simple,' the AC said. 'The way a race riot is simple, and lynching parties. All straightforward. Drop a man into this case with simple feelings about colour and all of a sudden a big step forward. We'll have caught up with the States.'

Gently hesitated. 'Are you suggesting . . .?'

The AC shook his head. 'MI5 have a listening-post. This isn't political. Yet. Of course, they clapped a D-notice on it and every paper killed the story, but we can't wrap it up for keeps. Not without a Star Chamber. The best we can do is soft-pedal it, play it down, stick with the book. Then grit our bloody teeth and hope. Still, I suppose we're used to that.'

Down by the Pool a tug was hooting, mournfully cheery through the rain.

'Why pick me?' Gently said. 'I've no great experience with the black

community.'

'Aha,' the AC said. 'Our well-known humanist. You were picked from on high. Angel needed, send for Gently. Somebody up there loves you.'

'I'm not that sort of angel,' Gently said.

'So you're the fool who's going to rush in.'

'I don't know how I'd shape with black suspects.'

'Say one raped your wife. Try that.'

The AC pulled off his glasses and stared small-eyed at Gently. Though a panel at the top of the big window stood ajar it still felt close in the office. On a cabinet near Gently stood a stack of reference books, their new plastic bindings smelling sour. Behind the plastic-smell lingered the paint-smell and a faint odour from the composition floor.

'I'm not married.'

'Oh God! Your sister.'

'I don't think my sister—'

'You have a girl-friend.'

The AC swung his glasses at Gently, thrusting, determined to pin him down.

'I'd be angry, of course.'

'You're telling me.'

'Boiling angry . . . that's natural. But I can't see the colour of his skin making it different . . . whoever did it, I'd be angry.'

'He's here illegally. A black immigrant.'

'A rapist. They come all colours.'

'He's living on state handouts. Never worked in his life.'

'Plenty of white criminals of that description.'

'But this one's black and violent. And your girlfriend hurt. Screaming for you.'

Gently grinned. 'You're hamming it,' he said.

'You'd strangle that bastard.'

'Just arrest him. I might even feel sorry for him, the way you tell it.'

The AC drew breath. 'All right,' he said. 'You probably pass. But I had to find out. Race relations is something the best of us slip on, and there isn't room for slipping here.'

He resumed his glasses, settling them in place with a quick, decided movement. Gently flickered the pages of his file. The tug gave two more reproachful toots.

'May I ask a question?'

'Of course.'

'Is it a conviction I'm after?'

The AC stared.

'It just seemed to me there was a way out,' Gently said. 'Chummie goes back quietly on a quick ship to Jamaica. No case, no trial. No headlines. No casualties.'

The AC closed his eyes. 'Tempting,' he said. 'But not for us. Handle it that way, and you're inviting every disgruntled illegal immigrant to use a knife.'

'It may come to that. Lack of evidence.'

The AC opened his eyes with a bang. 'There'd better be evidence, Gently,' he said. 'You asked a question. I'm answering it.'

'The hard way.'

'Yes.'

Gently shrugged, rose with his file. 'I'm the fool, then. I'll get over there and

make motions like rushing in.'

'Wait,' the AC said.

Gently stopped.

'Two things. One is they've pulled in Blackburn's partners. Blackburn kept records hidden in his flat, and they implicate Osgood and Grey. Offences contravening the Immigration Act. They're holding them on remand at Chiswick. That happened last night, not in the file. Other thing . . .'

His glasses dipped again. He looked steadily at Gently's blank face.

'Sorry it had to be you,' he said. 'If it blows up, I'm behind you.'

The rain was continuing, delicate, indefinite. Gently drove through it in his new Sceptre with its gold coach-line and crimped wheels. Along Cannon Street, round St Paul's, into Newgate Street and up West: the car soothing him with its polite potential and aura of current trend. At Divisional HQ he learned the officer i/c the case was at Blackburn's flat in Calonne Road. He drove to Calonne Road, wipers stroking all the way.

Calonne Road was a pleasant street lined with plane trees that were beginning to shed. One side was terraced; the houses were late Victorian, ornately architected in yellow brick. Blackburn had lived at 72, a detached house with stone-framed bays. It had a massive portico. In the macadamized forecourt stood a black Super Snipe and a dark blue Viva.

Gently parked and went in. A constable on the door directed him upstairs. The hall of the house had been reconstructed to give separate entries to four flats. Blackburn's flat was on the first floor and had the landing enclosed to form a vestibule.

Inside Gently found three men engaged in a very thorough search. One of them, tall, heavy-framed, jumped up from the floor as Gently entered.

'Chief Inspector Tallent?'

'That's me, sir.'

He was an officer Gently didn't know, a youngish man with small, pale eyes and a white stripe in his brown hair.

They shook hands. Tallent introduced him to the members of his team: Inspector Makin, sad-faced, balding, and a good-looking youngster named Stout.

'Found anything fresh?'

' 'Fraid not, sir. But I thought it was worth a try. You'll have heard what we found yesterday. The devil had hidden it pretty well.'

Stripey, they'd call him, behind his back, though certainly nowhere else. Tallent was mean-mouthed, hard-voiced, had the fists of a boxer.

Proudly he revealed to Gently a section of skirting-board that tipped outward to reveal a wall-safe.

No doubt a good cop, but a tough one. The wrong man here.

'Blackburn lived alone?'

Gently moved about the dishevelled room. It was the lounge. Good, modern furniture, wall-lighting, deep carpet. An expensive radiogram. A pile of LPs with 'Sergeant Pepper' on top. In a divider-bookcase reference-, year-books and a balance of sensational paperbacks.

'Yes, sir. It was his daily help found him.'

'Neighbours know anything?'

‘Nobody heard it. The flat below here is empty.’

‘See any visitors?’

‘No, sir. But there’s an outside stairway to the garden. Back of the garden is a service road. You don’t need to enter by the front door.’

‘Who last saw him alive?’

‘A tenant called Baker. Has the other flat downstairs. He saw Blackburn come in around 9.30 p.m. According to the post-mortem he was dead by about 10.’

‘You checked Blackburn’s office.’

‘We checked. He left there about 4.’

‘And in between?’

‘Don’t know, sir. Report says he’d eaten a meal.’

Gently had seen Blackburn’s photograph and had read his dossier in the file. Age forty, he’d been a handsome man with dark, curling hair and dark eyes. He came from Yorkshire, and his family lived there. He’d worked for a shipping company in Hull. Five years ago he’d moved to London and set up office in Poplar. No record. The legitimate side of his business was quite profitable.

‘He’d been with a woman. Nobody saw her?’

‘Seems not,’ Tallent said. ‘From what people say he was pretty cautious about the way he had visitors. They’ve heard them talking, laughing in here, playing music, romping around, but never seen them come and go. Must have always used the back way.’

‘You’ll have talked to Osgood and Grey?’

‘Yes, sir. They’re playing it close.’

‘What about the office staff?’

‘A clerk and a typist, sir. Nothing there.’

‘Let’s see some more of this flat.’

Tallent pushed open a door to reveal the bedroom. The double bed on which the body had been found had been stripped and the bedding removed. Here too the furniture was expensive. An elaborate bed-head was upholstered in white leather. A matching dressing-table, occupying one wall, had multiple mirrors and its own lighting. A fitted wardrobe held costly clothes. Shirts in the tallboy were hand-made. The windows, one of the front bays, were heavily curtained in blue velvet.

Gently sniffed. ‘Any women’s clothes?’

‘No, sir. That I particularly looked for.’

‘Nevertheless . . .’

They could all smell it, a faint, staling, feminine perfume.

Tallent pointed to the dressing-table. ‘Looks like he was fond of eau-de-Cologne, sir.’

Gently shook his head. ‘Not eau-de-Cologne. Whatever it was cost more than that.’

‘Something the woman wore?’

‘Perhaps. But she’d need to have been here more than once.’

‘Like she was his regular.’

‘Yes . . . regular. That dressing-table isn’t exactly masculine.’

He went to the wardrobe. Beside the stock of clothes were six, eight empty hangers. Two of the fitted drawers were empty. In the tallboy, two more.

Tallent gave a low whistle. ‘I ought to have spotted that,’ he said. ‘So she was living here.’

Gently shrugged. ‘More likely commuting, or she’d have been spotted. What do the dabs tell us?’

Tallent looked at Makin.

‘Several dabs of another person,’ Makin said. ‘Scattered about. Mostly in here. One or two in the kitchen.’

‘Not on record?’

‘No, sir.’

‘With us – or the Immigration Department?’

‘I—’ Makin’s incipient jowls flushed. ‘Didn’t try them, sir,’ he admitted.

‘Blast,’ Tallent said. He gave Makin a look that promised no sweetness for the future. ‘Bloody obvious, isn’t it, when you come to think. A black woman. It has to be.’

‘A black woman,’ Gently said. ‘Of course, she may not be on record. May not necessarily be black. But we’ll check right away.’

Tallent leered at Makin, who left hastily. Soon they heard the Viva start below. Tallent took out cigarettes, offered them to Gently, lit one, dragged smoke thirstily.

‘A black girl,’ he said. ‘You get the picture. I’d say he was asking for it, messing with them. Do you reckon she did it – or just set him up, then whistled the boyo in with his knife?’

‘She could have done it,’ Gently said flatly.

‘Yeah,’ Tallent said, his eyes imagining it. ‘But in the back – you think of that. Was he surprised? Was he sent?’

‘Perhaps she wasn’t in on it, sir,’ Stout suggested. ‘We don’t know for a fact she was.’

‘Likely,’ Tallent said. ‘He was still naked. You think he hung around that way all evening?’

‘How were his clothes left?’ Gently asked.

‘Stacked on the chair by the bed. Pretty neat. Trousers folded. He’d slipped out of the shirt quick, didn’t undo the cuff-links.’

‘And the bedclothes?’

‘Quilt on the floor, the rest mussed up but not turned back. They didn’t get in it. Guess he was impatient. Quite a bit of blood soaked through.’

He sieved out smoke.

‘Any luck with the knife?’

‘Not yet. Too many of that sort around. We’re checking the manor, but everyone sells them. Fifty per cent go to immigrants.’

‘Just the cheapest sort of job, sir,’ Stout put in. ‘Even toy-shops, newsagents stock them.’

They moved out of the bedroom. Everywhere in the flat you had the sensation of time standing still, as though these rooms had died too when Blackburn’s life was snuffed out. Suddenly their meaning had been arrested. Dead rooms, dead furniture. A bottle of milk in the kitchen had curdled. A calendar still showed the 17th.

‘These are the steps down,’ Tallent said, opening a door in the kitchen.

At the back of the house was a strip of garden with, at the bottom, a huge horse-chestnut. A garden on the right was vivid with dahlias, on the left apples dripped among sodden leaves. Blackburn’s steps were a fire-escape, doubtless added before the house was converted. Near the foot was an iron gate. It gave access to a footway between a wall and a wooden fence.

‘Leads to the service road at the back.’

That way Blackburn’s killer had come.

‘You’ve searched that area?’

‘We searched. Blackburn’s dabs on the gate, the stair-rail.’

The service road was unlit. Soon after six it would be dark down there, with only light from uncurtained windows to show how dark the darkness was. On the kitchen door a Yale lock, easily sprung with a thin knife-blade.

‘Give me some background,’ Gently said. ‘You’ll have had time to get on to it by now. Who did he know? Where did he eat? What pub did he go to?’

Tallent shuffled a brogued foot. ‘That’s just what we haven’t got on to,’ he said. ‘Seems he didn’t pal up with his neighbours, have friends. He was a loner. He looked in the office most days, but they were only working this one ship. He’d go up Soho some place to lunch. Sometimes he’d meet his partners in the evening. They’d go to a show, eat out, maybe chat up some birds in a pub. Then he’d come home, alone. He never brought the other two here.’

‘That leaves gaps,’ Gently said.

‘Yeah,’ Tallent frowned. ‘When he didn’t go to shows. Maybe his black bird took up his time. Perhaps we’ll fill in the blanks later.’

‘You’ve been questioning immigrants?’

‘Oh sure. We’ve got our quota round here.’

‘And?’

Tallent blew a raspberry with cigarette-smoke. ‘You know how the black community clams up. Push them hard and they give you the silent treatment. No dice. We’re still trying.’

‘I don’t think they know anything, sir,’ Stout said. ‘I’ve got contacts with the local immigrants. They’re pretty scared. They know we’re gunning for them. My impression is that chummie comes from elsewhere.’

Tallent blew smoke.

‘Still background,’ Gently said. ‘How much was Blackburn worth when he died?’

‘Plenty,’ Tallent said. ‘It’s in three accounts, and notes stashed away in deposit boxes. We got all that from his hideyhole. It adds up to eleven, twelve thou. There was a wad of three hundred, along with the papers and twenty-fivers in his wallet. They were charging the illegals two-fifty a trip, out of which Blackburn was netting one hundred. Then they hit them for another hundred later when they started regular work. Average twenty clients a month the year round. Tax free.’

‘For five years,’ Gently said.

‘The last big spender,’ Tallent said. ‘Perhaps there’s more stashed away. That’s why I’m taking the flat apart. He was also getting payments from some source not identified in the record, a matter of two, three hundred a month. Hardly worth him sending round for.’

‘Any sign of a search?’

‘No,’ Tallent said. ‘Nor they didn’t touch his wallet.’

‘His partners don’t stand to collect?’

‘Not any way we can figure yet.’ Tallent hissed smoke at the ceiling. ‘I’ve been working that angle, sir,’ he said. ‘I wanted it cleared out of the way. I buzzed Sheffield, asked them to make discreet inquiries about Blackburn’s family. There’s just his father, age seventy, and he hasn’t been away from Sheffield for years.’

‘A shock for the old man,’ Gently said.

‘Yeah,’ Tallent said. ‘But gilt-edged. And that answers that. Blackburn wasn’t put away for his money.’

‘Leaving revenge-murder.’

‘As you say, sir.’

‘By illegals.’

‘By illegals.’

Tallent ground out his cigarette-butt, making the tobacco-shreds spill around.

‘What I aim to do now, sir,’ he said, ‘is put some pressure on Osgood and Grey. They have to know more than they’ve been saying, and maybe the cells will have loosened their tongues.’

Gently nodded slowly. ‘I’ll sit in on that.’

Tallent closed the door on the garden. Stout switched off lights. The sudden dimness filled the flat with heavy, unexpected shadows.

As they went out to the cars Gently felt Tallent touch his arm. On the other side of the street a black man was passing. He felt their eyes on him, ducked his head, made his step a shuffle.

Tallent stood rigid, watching.

‘Yeah,’ he murmured. ‘Yeah. Yeah.’

CHAPTER TWO

DIVISIONAL HQ WAS a fussy Edwardian building faced at ground-floor level with glazed brown brick. Perhaps because of this the round-arched entrance seemed to belong to a public lavatory. Some half-hearted modernization had replaced hanging lamps with fluorescent strip, but in effect this had made more emphatic the inherent gloominess of the rooms. Old-fashioned central-heating, employing massive radiators, produced a temperature that was almost unbearable.

Tallent's office was at the back, overlooking a courtyard used by M/T. He ordered coffee to be sent in and found a comfortable chair from somewhere for Gently. His office was exceedingly tidy and the buff lino fat with polish.

'Sorry about Makin and the dabs.'

Such a slip would obviously needle Tallent. His office made it plain he'd have no mercy on inefficiency.

'It was outside usual routine,' Gently shrugged.

'But it bloody shouldn't have been,' Tallent said. 'Makin knew what the case was about. He's not as dumb as all that.'

'Do you have much trouble with the black community?'

'Used to,' Tallent said. 'Not now. We've got to know one another. They're pretty civil round here, now.'

'Meaning?'

Tallent's pale eyes were sharp. 'I reckon prevention beats cure, sir,' he said. 'I'm not one for cluttering up the courts. That's no answer.'

'So what's your method?'

Tallent smoothed one hand with the other. 'Gentle persuasion, sir,' he said. 'When they get out of line, I have a talk with them. And I let it be known I'm a peaceful copper who likes to live in a peaceful manor. And that's how it is, sir. The immigrants remain civil. They understand I'm a man of peace.'

The coffee came in. Tallent took his and carefully stirred in one lump of sugar. He sipped, looked at Gently. Gently paused over his cup.

'Did you know that black man we saw?'

'You bet. There aren't many I don't know.'

'Has he a record?'

'Not up till now. But I caught him once running around with a white girl.'

'So?'

Tallent smiled. 'A personal talk one evening, sir. It did the trick. He was quite co-operative. All that his sort need is gentle persuasion.'

'He certainly looked persuaded,' Gently said.

Tallent drank some more coffee.

'I thought we'd have Osgood in first, sir,' he said. 'I'd say he was the dumbest of the two. We can probably crack him soonest.'

* * *

Laceless, tieless, Osgood shuffled in and was given a seat in front of the desk. He wore a well-cut suit in Irish tweed but it hung ungracefully from his lumpish shoulders. He had sandy hair and broad, coarse features and stumpy hands with hairy backs. You might have taken him for a navvy hauled in off a pay-night carouse.

He sat heavily, spreading his knees and squinting at the occupants of the office.

'All right,' Tallent said. 'You've been charged, Osgood. I'm going to ask you questions, but you don't have to answer them. You don't have to answer them, but you can do. Am I getting through to you, Osgood?'

Osgood squinted at him, then away. 'Yeah,' he said. 'I can hear you. I'm a good listener, that's me. Perhaps you'd better get hold of my lawyer.'

'Never mind your lawyer, Osgood,' Tallent said. 'I'm going to talk to you now off the record. Like I was your brother talking to you, Osgood. I've got better advice for you than any lawyer.'

'Maybe you think so,' Osgood said.

'Yeah, I do think so,' Tallent said. 'And if you're hip you'll think so too, because you're up to here in trouble, Osgood. We've got you fixed. You were Blackburn's driver. You fetched the illegals in from the coast. We've found the pantechnicon you used down at Poplar, the one with the seats in the back, Osgood. And the garage man knows you, and his mechanics know you, and they can remember the last time you were out. And that time was the night of 1 October. And we all know what happened that night, don't we?'

Tallent paused, rustled some papers. 'Then there's what Grey's been telling us,' he said.

'Grey . . .?' Osgood said.

Tallent said nothing, got out his cigarettes, lit one. Osgood watched, his mouth slack, hands clamping on his knees.

'Yeah,' Tallent said. 'You're really in trouble. Maybe I did ought to ring your lawyer.'

'You get him,' Osgood said. 'I want him here.'

'On the other hand,' Tallent said. 'What good can he do you?' He issued smoke. 'It's this way,' he said. 'No lawyer can dig you out of this one, Ozzie. We've got the goods, and you know it. You're going away for a number of years. Grey knows it too. He's clever. Blackburn had a good man there, Ozzie. Grey isn't kidding himself he'll walk out of here, he's playing it smooth. A bright kiddo.'

Osgood's eyes clung to Tallent. 'Fred . . .' he said.

Tallent watched him.

'Fred wouldn't say nothing . . .'

Tallent turned over papers, found one, seemed to be reading.

'Look—' Osgood said.

Tallent flipped smoke at him. 'No, Osgood,' he said. 'You look here. We couldn't care less about your immigrant clients – what we want is Blackburn's murderer!' He struck the desk. 'And what are you doing about it? How are you helping us to find him? You're just clamming up and bleating about your bloody lawyer!'

He got up, leaned across the desk.

'Now listen to me, Osgood,' he said. 'Either you tell us what you know or by Jesus it'll go rough with you. I'm not an easy man, Osgood, and I've got you where I want you. You'd better give. Because if you don't, getting sent away will be the least

of it.'

He took a big lungful of smoke and jetted it straight into Osgood's eyes.

Osgood pulled back, sneezing, coughing, scrubbing at his eyes with his short-fingered hands.

'You getting the idea, Ozzie?' Tallent said softly.

'You – you can't treat me this way!' Osgood sobbed.

'What do you mean – treat you?' Tallent said. 'I'm just giving you advice, Ozzie, showing you the easy way. Nobody has to take it on the chin, not with me, Ozzie. I'm a peaceful man. People co-operate, don't howl for their lawyers, we get along fine. Like brothers.'

He took another big lungful of smoke. Osgood cringed, put up his hands. Tallent held the smoke for a moment, then let it trickle through his nose. He sat down again. Osgood watched him. His watery eyes couldn't get away from Tallent. Tallent took a few more drags, ran his fingers across his knuckles.

'So like I was saying, Osgood,' he said. 'You've been charged, don't have to answer questions. Don't have to answer them, but you can do. You still want to call your lawyer?'

'No,' Osgood said. 'I don't want him.'

'You're sure of that?'

'Yeah,' Osgood said.

'You can have him,' Tallent said. 'That's the rule.'

'I don't want him,' Osgood said. 'I don't want my lawyer.'

'You know,' Tallent said. 'I think we'll get along. I think you're a pretty good fella, Ozzie. You like a cigarette?'

'No,' Osgood said.

'Ah, you're giving them up,' Tallent said. 'That's wise.'

He blew smoke towards Osgood.

'So who did it, Ozzie?' he said. 'You can tell me, we're good friends. Who stuck that knife into Blackburn?'

Osgood pulled aside from the smoke, his hands lifting, fanning nervously.

'I don't know nothing about that,' he said. 'Not who killed him. Nothing.'

'Nothing at all, Ozzie?' Tallent said.

'Not about who killed him,' Osgood said.

'That's very disappointing, Ozzie,' Tallent said. 'And me prepared to be so friendly. You didn't do it yourself, I suppose, Ozzie?'

Osgood shuddered. 'I didn't do it.'

'No?' Tallent said. 'Where were you, Ozzie – when that knife was going into Blackburn's back?'

'I was at home.'

'You were at home.'

'Yes,' Osgood said. 'I bloody was. I was at home. I was in my flat. I was watching TV. I was at home.'

'Like when would that be?' Tallent said.

'It was all the evening,' Osgood said. 'I had a meal out in a caff, then I went home. All the evening.'

'All the evening,' Tallent said. 'That must have been lonesome for you, Ozzie. Or did you have friends in?'

'No, I didn't have friends in.'

‘A pity,’ Tallent said. ‘Isn’t that a pity?’

‘Look, I can prove it,’ Osgood said. ‘The old girl next door, she see me come in. She can hear my TV through the wall. I can bloody prove it. I was in all the evening.’

Tallent kneaded his hands together. ‘You’re not proving anything, Osgood,’ he said. ‘You’re just telling me you faked an alibi, like leaving the TV switched on.’

‘But I didn’t fake no alibi!’

‘Yeah,’ Tallent said. ‘That could be the answer. You didn’t love Blackburn, did you, Osgood – with him only paying you in peanuts?’

‘I never killed Tommy!’

‘It could stand up.’

‘I tell you I never!’

‘The jury might go for it. A stupid berk with a big grudge. Oh yes, they’d go for it.’

‘But I never did it!’

‘I can hear you,’ Tallent said. ‘You don’t have to tell me three or four times. Only the way things are I can’t believe it, there’s nobody else fits in so well. You don’t know anybody, do you?’

‘It was an illegal what did it!’ Osgood blurted. ‘You bleeding know it was – they was all agin him after what happened.’

‘An illegal, was it?’

‘A bleeding illegal.’

‘Like what was his name?’

‘I dunno.’

‘You don’t know enough,’ Tallent said. ‘Not nearly enough, Ozzie boy.’

Osgood gulped breath, his hands working. His pale eyebrows were hooked high. Sweat glinted on his forehead. You could smell him. He was afraid.

Gently said, ‘You say the black community had it in for Blackburn?’

Osgood’s fishlike stare switched to him.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘That’s right.’

‘People known to you?’

‘I ain’t saying—’

‘You don’t know any black people?’

Osgood swallowed with his mouth open. ‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I know some.’

‘You have black friends?’

‘I never said that.’

‘Black acquaintances?’

‘Yeah, maybe. I live up Acton way, don’t I? There’s black guys wherever you look.’

‘And Blackburn knew black people?’

‘Course he did.’

‘The same black people that you know?’

‘How should I know—’

‘Did he?’

Osgood swallowed again. ‘Yeah.’

‘Now that’s co-operation,’ Tallent said. ‘That’s the way to answer a policeman. You started slow, Ozzie, but you’re learning. Just keep remembering we’re your friends.’

‘And these mutual acquaintances,’ Gently said. ‘There’d be some place where you

met them?'

Osgood hesitated.

Tallent dusted his knuckles. 'Keep helping the police, Ozzie,' he said.

'In the street, around,' Osgood said quickly.

'Not in the street, around,' Tallent said.

'So pubs, caffs . . .'

Tallent went still, stared at him.

'All right, a bloody club then!'

'Yeah,' Tallent said.

'A club,' Gently said. 'What's the name of it?'

'It's a dump they call the Coconut Grove. Mainly black punters. They run it. Tommy and us used to go there.'

'The address?'

'Brickfields. Paradise Road.'

'That's Willesden way,' Tallent said. 'Brickfields is a black community.'

'Blackburn belonged to this club?' Gently asked. 'Yeah – no. He sort of belonged.'

'He was a member?'

Osgood worked his hands. 'Like he knew the people. That sort of thing.'

'Who are the people?'

'It's a black couple who run it. Sharkey Sunshine and his missus.'

'Who?' Tallent said.

Osgood repeated the name. Tallent whistled, looked at Gently.

'Small world,' he said. 'I know Sunshine. He's one of these educated types. I helped to educate him. He tried to open a joint here a couple of years back. So he's tied up with this, is he?'

'I never said so,' Osgood said.

'You don't have to, Ozzie boy,' Tallent said. 'You weren't trying to cover up, were you? And this club – let me guess – they dance, sit around and booze. Plenty of women. Rooms upstairs. Women. Like Blackburn had been with.'

'It ain't that way,' Osgood said. 'They run it decent, him and his missus.'

'And you never went there to lay a black woman?'

'I—' Osgood said.

Tallent laughed.

'Were you there Tuesday night?' Gently asked.

'Didn't I say I was at home!'

'Would Blackburn have gone there – when he left his office?'

Osgood stared furiously, shook his head.

'He can't lie,' Tallent said. 'He's too honest – or too dumb. Now all we want is the name of the woman. We'll have this case wrapped up by teatime.'

Gently looked at Osgood. 'Well?' he said.

Osgood's large mouth was trembling.

'Speak up, Ozzie,' Tallent said, stropping his knuckles on the desk-edge.

Osgood winced. 'I ain't saying any more.'

'You aren't what?' Tallent went still.

'Bloody hit me then,' Osgood said. 'I don't care! I've said all I'm saying.'

Tallent stood up.

'Right,' Gently said. 'Osgood can go back to the cells.'

‘But the bastard knows!’ Tallent burst out.

‘He’s within his rights not to answer.’

‘Go on, hit me,’ Osgood said. ‘Hit me. Hit me. I don’t care.’

Tallent stood up very straight, his thin mouth on the twist.

‘All right,’ he said to the constable on the door. ‘Take him away.’

He sat again.

* * *

They brought Grey in. Grey was a handsome man of forty-five. There wasn’t a thread of white in his neat dark hair. He had sideburns. They suited him. He had sharp hazel eyes. He was powerfully but elegantly made and a grey lounge suit sat well on him. Having no tie gave him a raffish look, showed up his strong neck. He managed to avoid a prisoner’s shuffle. He sat easily. He smiled.

‘Permission to smoke?’

Tallent was rocking back in his chair, eyes hooded. He’d said nothing to Gently after Osgood went, before Grey came. He’d sat finishing his cigarette, staring a long way off, chin down. Now he regarded Grey carelessly, paid no attention to his remark.

At last he let the chair rock forward.

‘I don’t know why I bother with you, Grey,’ he said. ‘You’re hooked. Ozzie’s been singing like a canary in the spring.’

‘Nice for you,’ Grey said. ‘You like music?’

‘That sort of music,’ Tallent said. ‘I could listen to it all day when it’s about a cheapie like you.’

‘Naughty,’ Grey said. ‘I’m not cheap.’

‘You weren’t so dear, either,’ Tallent said. ‘Fifteen per cent on the net you were getting. A bright boy like you. And you set it up for him, didn’t you? A fat lot Blackburn knew about Jamaica. But slick Freddie knew, he’d been out there running a tourist swindle. Two years Freddie was out there acting like Our Man in Jamaica. The master-mind. And all he got for it was fifteen per cent on the net.’

‘That’s sugar for you,’ Grey said.

‘Sugar my arse,’ Tallent said. ‘Ozzie’s shot us the whole works. How he picked up the illegals, drove them to Brickfields.’

‘You shouldn’t listen to him,’ Grey said. ‘He’ll be your lousiest witness ever.’

‘How he dropped them off at the Coconut Grove.’

‘Their rum is smuggled,’ Grey said. ‘You know that?’

Tallent rocked his chair again, came back slit-eyed.

‘Only all that doesn’t matter, Grey, does it?’ he said. ‘We can forget the Immigration Act Sixty-two as of 10 p.m. Tuesday evening. That was a holding charge, sonny. You’re never going into court on that. Ozzie, yes. But you’re special. You we groom for the Old Bailey.’

‘What, me?’ Grey said.

‘Yeah, you,’ Tallent said. ‘We’ve been working on it, Grey, and you came out as the answer. Blackburn cheated you, didn’t he? Never paid you your proper share. And you, who set him up in the business. It’s open and shut, you’re our chummie.’

Grey polished his nails on his sleeve. ‘If you say so,’ he said. ‘May I smoke now?’

‘No,’ Tallent said. ‘You bloody mayn’t smoke now, Grey.’

Grey looked at his nails, polished some more.

‘I didn’t ought to have had an alibi,’ he said. ‘It’ll spoil it for you, me having an alibi. Perhaps we could work something out.’

‘We’ll work something out all right,’ Tallent said.

‘Yes, we’ll have to,’ Grey said. ‘Tuesday evening my wife and I took in a show at the Aldwych. I still have the ticket stubs somewhere. Can’t think why I held on to them.’

‘And that’s the big alibi?’

‘I’d say it was fireproof.’

‘You don’t know alibis, sonny,’ Tallent said. ‘That one we’ll split in twenty pieces. Went to a show with his wife, he says.’

Grey worked on his nails. ‘So nothing,’ he said. ‘Why are you trying to hang it on me? Maybe you can make like I could have had a motive, but that’s all. I’m not sweating.’

‘You know a better prospect?’ Tallent said.

‘Plenty,’ Grey said. ‘And they’re all black.’

‘But names you don’t come across with,’ Tallent said.

‘Even names,’ Grey said. ‘Maybe.’

He looked hard at Tallent, held out his hand. ‘This’ll be about time for that smoke,’ he said. ‘I’ve got a funny memory, Ozzie’ll tell you. I always remember better with a fag on.’

Tallent was still for a moment, then silently flipped a cigarette to Grey. Grey reached for the matches lying on the desk, lit the cigarette. Tallent watched him.

‘Yes,’ Grey said. ‘It helps me think. I ought to get plenty of fags in here. Don’t mind paying for them, of course. Wouldn’t dream of being a charge on the Special Fund.’

‘Don’t push your luck,’ Tallent said.

‘I was thinking of a deal,’ Grey said. ‘There’s so much I know you’d like to know. Think of the leg-hours it could save you.’

Tallent picked up a rule lying on the desk. He looked at it. He broke the rule in two. He laid the two halves back on the desk. He looked at Grey.

‘Go on,’ he said.

Grey savoured smoke. ‘I look at it this way. That charge about the illegals isn’t going to stick. There’s nothing that ties me in with that other than records of payments from Tommy. So why go treating me like a criminal? We could make life easier for each other. A few home comforts for me while I’m here, maybe the name of the killer for you.’

‘The name of the killer?’ Tallent said.

‘Maybe,’ Grey said. ‘A short-list, anyway.’

‘You said the killer.’

‘I’ll go with that. There’s one hot one. I’ll finger him.’

Tallent stared at the desk a while, then sent a quick look at Gently. Gently shrugged, made a motion with his hand. Tallent prodded the halves of his ruler.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘I’m promising nothing. We don’t do that sort of deal here, Grey. If you’ve any complaint to make I’ll deal with that, but nothing else. You with me?’

‘Oh quite,’ Grey said. ‘I’m short of fags.’

Tallent shimmied his packet across the desk. Grey slid the packet into his pocket, blew a smoke ring, smiled.

Now,’ Tallent said. ‘Give.’

‘Aaron Taylor,’ Grey said.

‘Who’s Aaron Taylor?’

‘A black kid. Works as a porter at Waterloo. Lives in Denbigh Street, Brickfields. You’ll find him hanging about the Coconut Grove.’

‘What about him?’

‘He’s the hot one. Used to be Sadie Sunshine’s boy-friend.’

‘Is she Sharkey’s missus?’

‘No. Sister. Good-looking girl who does a dance act.’

‘So how is he hot?’

‘Tommy fancied Sadie. Tommy usually got what he went after. Aaron moped around like a bear with mange. The wonder is he didn’t shiv Tommy sooner.’

‘Is that so?’ Tallent said. ‘And this Sadie Sunshine was Blackburn’s woman?’

‘Am I being helpful?’ Grey said. ‘Don’t let me waste your time or anything.’

Tallent chivvied the ruler. ‘How do you know this?’ he said. ‘Seems to me Blackburn wouldn’t broadcast it.’

‘Maybe not round his home patch he wouldn’t, but he wasn’t particular among the illegals.’

‘He had a liking for black girls?’

‘You got it. There’s good and bad black guys. I know some I like a lot, others are real mean bastards: Blackburn played around with them. They were his business. He owned a slice of the Coconut Grove. He spent a lot of his time down there, probably went there Tuesday evening.’

‘Owned a slice, did he?’ Tallent said, scribbling notes.

‘I’m giving you value,’ Grey said. ‘You didn’t know that.’

‘Never mind what I know or don’t know,’ Tallent said. ‘Keep singing, little bird.’

Grey smiled, puffed. He glanced at Gently. His quick eyes had no smile in them.

‘So that’s your best bet,’ he said. ‘Anguished Aaron, the ditched partner. Emotional type. Be heavy with him. Likely he’ll scream out a confession.’

‘How long was Blackburn going with Sadie?’ Asked Tallent.

‘A year maybe, maybe more.’

‘And Taylor was watching it, spying on them?’

‘Why not? He was always around. Sadie did her song-and-dance numbers, then she’d sit with Tommy and us. Sometimes we’d all go into the office, sometimes Sharkey’s rooms upstairs. Aaron was around. You’d catch him looking at Tommy. He never gave up on Sadie.’

‘Blackburn necked with her in front of him?’

‘Not in public,’ Grey said. ‘You got the message all right, mind. Sadie didn’t need pushing. Then later on, always late, they’d take off in Tommy’s car, and that’d be the last you’d see of them, and Tommy’d come in late in the morning.’

‘Taylor ever follow them?’

Grey shook his head. ‘I wasn’t there to keep tabs on Aaron.’

‘So why were you there?’

‘Say calypsos send me. And black girls are hot.’

‘Another one obsessed with black girls,’ Tallent said.

‘Is that a crime?’ Grey said. ‘Black women, pot, where’s the difference? I can take them or leave them be.’

‘Cocky sod,’ Tallent said.

‘Lucky for you,’ Grey said. ‘This cocky sod has fingered Aaron for you, given

you names, a place to look.'

Tallent stared at Grey, chin lowered. Grey smoked, looked out of the window.

Gently asked, 'What was the brother's attitude to Miss Sunshine's liaison with Blackburn?'

Grey looked towards him, thought a moment. 'Not easy to read Sharkey,' he said. 'Tommy and him worked together. Tommy was taking him for plenty, but Tommy set him up to start with. Sharkey's deep. I don't think he worried. He's got no chip on his shoulder for white guys. Sadie's dead independent anyway, he never tells her what to do.'

'Was there ill-feeling at the club about the *Naxos Island*?'

'Some,' Grey said. 'You could feel the coolness.'

'Were there any threats made?'

'Not threats exactly. But like Tommy wasn't top of the pops any longer. Before that Tommy went over pretty good. I believe he really liked the immigrants. He had an image, you know? He was taking their dough, but he was on their side.'

'Did he have trouble with Mr Sunshine?'

'Not in my hearing,' Grey said. 'They chewed it over in the office, outside Sharkey acted about the same.'

'Did anyone you know lose a relative in the wreck?'

Grey hesitated, then shook his head.

'You're sure of that?'

'Sure as I can be.'

Grey took a last lungful then stubbed his cigarette.

'What part did Osgood play at the club?'

'Osgood?'

'Yes.'

Grey's eyes were careful.

'He just lived it up. Booze, bits. A simple soul is Ozzie.'

'He had nothing to hide about that? Like telling us all you've just told us?'

Grey smiled. 'Nothing special. He just wouldn't tell you on principle.'

'But you've told us.'

Grey's smile went. 'That's different,' he said. 'I made a deal.'

'So you did,' Gently said.

Grey looked. He said nothing.

'Like to sing some more?' Tallent said, picking up the ruler-halves and grinding them in his hands.

'No,' Grey said. 'That's my lot. And I'd like a hot lunch if there's one going.'

'You better get out,' Tallent said. 'Before something interferes with your appetite.'

'Thanks,' Grey said. 'Nice meeting you, gentlemen.'

'Yeah,' Tallent said. 'So scram.'

Grey was escorted out. Tallent kneaded the ruler-halves some moments longer.

'So what do you think, sir?' he said at last. 'Was that louse conning us into something?'

'His facts probably check,' Gently said. 'Perhaps not the construction he wants us to put on them.'

'He'd better say prayers,' Tallent said. 'If his alibi's faked, he'll need a parson.'

CHAPTER THREE

THEY DROVE TO Brickhills in Gently's car, Stout following in a Mini. Tallent was silent during the drive. He sat slumped, chain-smoking. They'd caught a sandwich and more coffee in the canteen in the bowels of HQ, a steaming basement room sharing space with a huge boiler and a jungle of pipes. Damp, hot-faced policemen had sprawled around them, apparently overawed by the presence of Gently. Gently had confounded them by removing his jacket and sitting in shirtsleeves, feet on a chair.

If anything, the rain was increasing, and the poor light brought a sparkle to shop windows. Nearing Brickhills they passed under railway viaducts and skirted a canal, wharves, scrapyards. Brickhills lay in S Division and Tallent had rung them before leaving. A Wolseley with flashing dome-light picked them up and headed them through dim streets. There, behind narrow pavements, low terrace houses huddled smokily. At street-corners poorly lit shops spread their wares on untidy forecourts. A few hunched figures hurried through the rain. Dark faces turned to watch the three cars.

The Wolseley bore right into a long straight cul-de-sac closed on one side by a sooty wall. Above the wall ranged signal gantries and the roofs of a train appeared creeping by. Opposite the wall were terrace houses, then a rag-dealer's yard, then a blank-windowed depository. At the end of the street stood a former Railway Mission Hall. Its front was decorated with a painted cut-out of palm-trees.

The Wolseley pulled in and Gently parked behind it. A sergeant ran round to his window, saluted.

'We've instructions to stay with you, sir,' he said, when Gently slicked down the window.

Gently stared. 'You're expecting trouble?'

'No, sir. Routine precaution. Some of the cheeky bastards round here might whip the wheels off your car.'

They got out.

In front of the Mission Hall was parked an old red Consul without hub-plates. Fat, inebriated letters jazzed across the cut-out read *The Coconut Grove Club.* Double doors stood open. A juke-box inside pounded calypso music. Tubs of plastic fern and nets of coloured coconuts furnished the small vestibule beyond the doors.

They pushed through glass swingers into what was still largely a mission hall. At the back the original platform was heavily masked with more cut-outs. The walls had been draped with dyed hessian to which were pinned silhouettes of dancing figures and cones issuing coloured light were mounted above to the naked tie-beams. On the right a bar counter had been constructed. It was heavily draped with the plastic fern. It incorporated a coffee-machine and the shelves behind it were well stocked. Cheap folding tables and stackable chairs occupied the stained parquet floor and the juke-

box, cased in pink plastic, was stationed opposite the bar.

Beside the juke-box sat a black man staring at a glass of straw-coloured liquid. The juke-box was playing 'Marianne'. The black man looked at the policeman, didn't move. Tallent strolled over to him.

'Up,' he said.

The man looked at him, slowly rose. He was a tall, thick-featured man. He stood stooping, his long arms loose.

'What's your name?' Tallent said.

'How is that, sir?' the man said.

Tallent stepped closer. 'You deaf, boy?' he said. 'Don't play dumb with me or I'll push your teeth in.'

The black man edged back, eyes rimming white.

'I don't know you, sir,' he said. 'Who are you?'

'I'm John Birch,' Tallent said, following up. 'You heard of him, boy? Need an introduction?'

'All right,' Gently said. 'We're police officers. We want a word with Mr Sunshine.'

'Yes, sir, yes, sir,' said the man. 'That surely is him who just walked in.'

He flapped a big hand at the counter. Behind it now a man was standing. He was a bearded man with a handsome face and a small ring in each ear. He was tall, wide-shouldered, and had finer cheekbones than most West Indians. He had large, steady brown eyes. The brown eyes were fixed on Tallent.

'Well, well,' Tallent said, striding to the counter. 'Long time no see, *Mister* Sunshine. So you moved to the ghetto. You finally made it. Chiswick's gain was Brickfield's loss.'

The brown eyes didn't flicker. 'You got business with me, man?' Sunshine said.

'Yeah,' Tallent said. He struck the counter. 'And it's *Sir*, when you're talking to me, *man*,' he said.

'Man, you don't change,' Sunshine said.

Tallent went still. 'Easy,' he said. 'Maybe you've forgotten the little talk we had by the river three years back. Maybe I should remind you.'

'Maybe,' Sunshine said. 'Maybe not, man. But you just get the itch out of your knuckles. I knows that gentleman standing behind you, and he ain't gonna let you beat me up.'

'Yeah?' Tallent said.

'Yeah's right,' Sunshine said. 'I seen his picture in the papers. He's a famous big man, *Mister* Tallent, and he won't go for you knocking us folk about.'

Tallent's hand went to the counter-flap. 'Does he talk to us this way, sir?' he jerked to Gently.

'Why not?' Gently said. 'It's a pleasant voice. I've heard plenty of singers with far worse.'

Tallent's eyes hooked round at him.

'Do you sing?' Gently asked Sunshine.

'Yes, sir,' Sunshine said. 'I come from Jamaica, man. It's the most musicallest country you'll ever hear of.'

'You write your own songs?'

'You bet, man.'

'Accompany yourself?'

‘I certainly do. If you like real music, man, you come around. You won’t get it realler any place in London.’

‘So isn’t that nice?’ Tallent said.

‘Is the coffee-machine working?’ Gently asked.

‘Yes, sir,’ Sunshine said, moving towards it. ‘Fresh-ground Jamaican beans. Man, you’re going to like this.’

He set up four enormous cups. Tallent ripped a cigarette from a packet. He lit it, leaned his back to the counter, poured smoke at the coloured lights. Then he came off the counter, stalked across to the other West Indian.

‘I asked you a question, sonny,’ he said. ‘Like maybe you forgot I didn’t get an answer. I like to be answered. It sort of stops me getting jumpy, and I’m a jumpy man. What’s your name?’

‘Aaron Taylor,’ the man said.

‘Ah, how nice,’ Tallent said. ‘Don’t go away, Aaron. Stick around, Aaron. You look so lonely. We must talk.’

They drank the coffee sitting round a table with Taylor hugging his glass behind them. The juke-box had stopped. Now and then you could hear the subterranean rumble of trains. Sunshine sat between Gently and Stout, facing Tallent across the table. The door was bolted. From the room behind the bar came the sound of someone handling crockery.

‘So the coffee’s all right,’ Tallent said, setting his cup down. ‘That’s good. We like our coffee.’

‘I aim to make the bestest coffee,’ Sunshine said. ‘With my clientele, I just have to.’

‘Yeah, with your clientele,’ Tallent said. ‘We were coming round to that, boy. Like the one we ran across yesterday with a knife sticking out of his back. Or was he a client?’

‘You know he was,’ Sunshine said. ‘Else why you come around here?’

‘So that we know,’ Tallent said. ‘And perhaps some other things, boy. You like to demonstrate a little singing, and me asking you, all polite?’

Sunshine gulped a mouthful of coffee, holding the cup in both hands.

‘I don’t hide nothing, man,’ he said. ‘You got no reason being tough with me. I knew Tommy a long while. Him and me were good friends. Tommy was round this club a lot. I teach him how to play the guitar.’

‘Every day something fresh,’ Tallent said. ‘You taught him how to play the guitar.’

‘Sure,’ Sunshine said. ‘I teach him that. Though he never play that damn-thing well.’

‘And you charged him for it?’ Tallent said. ‘Like knocking the lessons off his percentage?’

Sunshine drank. ‘If you know, man,’ he said, ‘why you sit around here asking questions?’

‘Yeah,’ Tallent said. ‘You have a point, boy. I don’t have to sit here asking. I got the proof out of Blackburn’s flat. He was shaking you down for sixty, seventy a week. And that’s a helluva lot from a place like this if you’re running it on the up-and-up – maybe with books that check out and proper returns to Her Majesty’s Servants.’

‘I got books,’ Sunshine said.

‘Showing Blackburn’s cut?’ Tallent said.

‘Sure,’ Sunshine said. ‘That was capital repayment. Tommy put up the money for this place, man.’

‘Put up how much?’ Tallent said. ‘You could buy this joint for one year’s shakedown.’

‘There’s interest, man.’

‘I’ll bet,’ Tallent said. ‘It had to be two or three hundred per cent. And you loved it, didn’t you? You loved being skinned, having a white man doing you down, a white man who was trading in illegals anyway, who was laying your sister odd nights. Tommy Blackburn. Sharkey’s pal.’

‘It wasn’t like that,’ Sunshine said.

‘No?’ Tallent said. ‘Take your sister.’

‘You just don’t talk about her,’ Sunshine said. ‘There ain’t no call to talk that way.’

‘I’ll decide that, boy,’ Tallent said. ‘And I say take your sister Sadie. A real piece, so they tell me. Got it stacked. Likes the action. And Blackburn can’t keep his paws off her, keeps running her home and banging her rotten. A white guy laying your pretty sister. And her liking it. Her wide open. You kept smiling about that, did you? Just slapped his back, gave him guitar-lessons?’

The cup chattered on Sunshine’s saucer. ‘You lay off Sadie, man,’ he said.

‘Don’t get temperamental, sonny,’ Tallent said. ‘Why shouldn’t she like being banged by one of us?’

‘You make it evil,’ Sunshine said. ‘You make it dirt, the way you talk, man.’

‘So it’s dirty, a white guy with a black girl?’

‘It just don’t signify,’ Sunshine said. ‘You got a bad, bad spirit inside you, man. You goin’ to hate, and you goin’ to hate. Ain’t white nor black got any consequence, all that stuff’s inside your head.’

‘Now,’ Tallent said, ‘metaphysics. Didn’t I say this boy was educated?’

‘Inside your head,’ Sunshine said. ‘It ain’t real, not none of that. There ain’t no black men. I never saw one. There ain’t no white men. You ain’t white.’

‘Say that again,’ Tallent said.

‘You just ain’t white,’ Sunshine said. ‘You’s mixed colouring, kind of reddy. There ain’t no white men in nature.’

‘Is that so?’ Tallent said, staring at him. ‘Keep on, boy. Spill your guts.’

‘We’s all some kind of colour,’ Sunshine said. ‘Every goddam last member of the human race. If you’s a man, you’s some kind of colour, like you got two legs and one nose.’

‘Or one prick,’ Tallent said. ‘Still I’m learning. Don’t stop.’

‘So how’s it going to matter,’ Sunshine said, ‘about Tommy and Sadie liking each other? That’s okay, man, that’s fine, man. I don’t mind him loving my sister.’

‘You kind of threw it in with the drinks.’

‘Man,’ Sunshine said. ‘How do I reach you?’

‘For a start,’ Tallent said, ‘you can stop being a sanctimonious tosser trying to teach an old cop morals. What are you kidding about, boy? Where do you get the edge? A black guy running a shady deal and mixed-up with people traffickers like Blackburn. You over at Reading in the summer, boy?’

Sunshine hesitated. ‘Yeh, man. I went there.’

‘Yeah, you went there,’ Tallent said. ‘A bright boy like you is political fodder.’

‘I go listen to that man,’ Sunshine said. ‘It don’t mean I take in everything he says. He’s wrong about violence. It don’t do no good. Ain’t nothing come of violence but a lot more violence.’

‘Sure,’ Tallent said. ‘You were against it. And killing white folks, you were against that bit. But somehow a knife got into Tommy Blackburn, like your front man was recommending.’

‘Man, Tommy’s my friend—’

‘Some friend,’ Tallent said. ‘Him squeezing you dry, whoring your sister. Then drowning a score of illegals on top. You wouldn’t need orders, boy – would you?’

‘You saying I killed him?’

‘You’re quick,’ Tallent said. ‘You jump down my throat. I was going to say that.’

‘But man, I was here all Tuesday evening—’

‘Like with witnesses,’ Tallent said. ‘All black.’

‘But—’ Sunshine said.

‘But,’ Tallent said. ‘You could have done that job in an hour. Just jumped in that heap of yours outside, driven down to Chiswick, cut him, driven back. And fifty black clubbers to say you never left here. Or maybe didn’t notice you’d gone. And little sister comes back, throws her gear on, is next seen shaking her hips up there. So where is this little sister, boy?’

‘Oh man, you’re crazy,’ Sunshine said.

‘Yeah, but where is she?’ Tallent said.

Sunshine was trembling. He said, ‘She’s gone.’

‘Gone,’ Tallent said.

He looked at Gently. Gently sat hunched over a pipe, chin on hand, eyes casual, smoke trickling from his nostrils. Stout, scratching shorthand notes, also broke off to look at Gently. Then he ducked his head again, pencilled a cross into the shorthand.

‘Gone where?’ Tallent said.

‘I just don’t know, man,’ Sunshine said.

‘ ’Bout lunchtime yesterday she’s gone. She didn’t leave no note, nothing.’

‘Where does she live?’

‘She lives right here. She got a room in with us.’

‘That wasn’t her shuffling the saucers.’

‘No, man. That’s my wife in there.’

Tallent jumped up, stepped into the bar, threw open a door at the back. Behind it a black woman was crouching, her ear at the level of the keyhole. Her arm rose to cover her face. She sprang to her feet and backwards from Tallent. She stood a yard into the room beyond, arm still raised, eyes rimming.

‘Whadyahknow,’ Tallent said. ‘And she was here all the time.’

‘That’s my wife, man,’ Sunshine said, rising. ‘You ain’t got no business with her.’

‘Siddown,’ Tallent said. ‘I got lots of business. Eavesdropping snoopers are always my business. And how do I know she’s your wife anyway? How do I know she isn’t your tart of a sister?’

‘I ain’t Sadie,’ the woman said, shivering.

‘You ain’t Sadie,’ Tallent said.

‘No, sir, I’m Sharkey’s wife Sarah. You ask Aaron. He tell you.’

‘That right, Taylor?’ Tallent jerked over his shoulder.

‘Yes, sir, sure is right,’ Taylor mumbled.

‘Well, we’ll get round to it,’ Tallent said. ‘You people lie to me only the once. Let’s see your left hand, Monah.’

The woman put out a long-fingered hand. It shook. On the ring finger were a solitaire ring and a gold band.

‘So perhaps,’ Tallent said. ‘You better join the party, Monah.’

‘You leave her out of this, man,’ Sunshine said.

‘I talk, you wrap up,’ Tallent said.

The woman came out, closing the door, taking a quick step past Tallent. She was tall, slim, with small-boned features and a ripe mouth that ought to smile. She wore a flowered and frilled bib apron over a mini-length linen dress. She had on fur-lined slippers. She moved silently, had poise.

Stout hastily got up and placed a chair for her. She smiled without looking at him.

‘Now that’s all cosy,’ Tallent said, sitting down again. ‘What you might call a family conference. Just one member missing who ought to be here. And her unaccountably gone away.’

Sunshine slanted his bearded face. ‘I just can’t help you with that, man,’ he said. ‘And it ain’t no use you coming the plantation-boss, because what I don’t know I can’t tell you. Sadie is the most independent female that ever strutted round on two legs. When Sadie’s coming, she comes. When Sadie’s going, she goes.’

‘I hear you talking,’ Tallent said. He switched suddenly to Sarah Sunshine. ‘But you’d know where she went, Monah, wouldn’t you?’ he said. ‘Like girls together? You’d know?’

‘Me, I don’t know,’ Sarah Sunshine said hastily.

‘Oh, come on, now,’ Tallent said. ‘You and her in each other’s pockets, fixing hair, swapping clothes. When did she go?’

‘I don’t know that, sir.’

‘Sure you do. You’d help her pack.’

‘No.’ She flickered a glance at her husband. ‘I was out down the shops. Sharkey will tell you.’

‘Never mind Sharkey, Monah,’ Tallent said. ‘I’m asking you, you tell me. I want to know how Sadie Sunshine lit out of here without you spotting her.’

‘Sarah surely went out,’ Sunshine said.

‘You shut up,’ Tallent said. ‘Come on, Monah.’

‘I – it’s just that way,’ Sarah Sunshine said. ‘When I come back, Sadie is gone.’

‘Try again,’ Tallent said.

‘It ain’t no use—’

‘I’m being so nice, Monah.’

‘Oh my gosh,’ Sarah Sunshine said. She swung aside, hand pushing the table.

‘Yeah,’ Tallent said. ‘You knew, Monah. Sadie wouldn’t go without a word to her buddy. The way she was getting out ahead of the cops, where she was running, how to get in touch.’

‘That ain’t so, man!’ Sunshine burst out.

‘Shuddup,’ Tallent jerked. ‘I’ve told you twice.’

‘Sadie ain’t running from the cops nor nobody—’

Tallent struck the table. Sunshine was silent.

‘Sharkey – didn’t know,’ Sarah said.

‘That’s right,’ Tallent said. ‘Who would tell Sharkey?’

‘Sadie say there’ll be a lot of trouble over Tommy, it’s best she go away, take a job somewhere else.’

‘Smart,’ Tallent said. ‘Where?’

‘She didn’t say.’

‘And you didn’t ask her. Right, the next question.’

Sarah sank her head. ‘Yes, I asked her,’ she said. ‘She say better I don’t know, can’t tell anyone.’

‘Still smart,’ Tallent said. ‘So you began guessing.’

‘I don’t know,’ Sarah said. ‘I don’t know, sir.’

‘But you guessed,’ Tallent said. ‘You knowing Sadie. Where her friends lived, relatives, background.’

‘We don’t have no relatives this way,’ Sunshine put in quickly. ‘All our folks is back in Jamaica.’

‘Little man,’ Tallent said. ‘If you speak again I won’t be responsible for what happens.’

Sarah Sunshine rocked her head.

‘Yes, Monah?’ Tallent said.

‘No, sir, no, sir,’ Sarah Sunshine said. ‘It’s like Sharkey says, all our folks is back home.’

Tallent pulled back in his chair, staring at her. ‘Sometimes,’ he said, ‘I’m the nicest person, Monah. I go for months not raising my voice, letting other people walk all over me. Other times I’m not like that. Other times I’m a bloody devil. You wouldn’t like me when I’m not nice, Monah – you people never do. And I’m not nice when some black girl is lying to me. Around them I’m worst of all.’

Sarah Sunshine swayed, her teeth nicking.

‘Where did Sadie go?’ Tallent said.

‘Honest to the Lord—’

‘*Where did she go?*’

Sarah Sunshine shook. She said nothing.

Gently took his pipe from his mouth, tapped it, laid it in the ashtray. Tallent looked aside at him, but Gently didn’t seem to notice Tallent.

‘How long have you people been married?’ he asked Sunshine.

Sunshine hesitated, watching Tallent.

‘Answer the Superintendent!’ Tallent snapped. ‘Don’t you try going dumb too, boy.’

‘Four years,’ Sunshine said quickly.

‘That would be in Jamaica,’ Gently said.

‘Yes, sir, in Kingston,’ Sunshine said. He paused, then said, ‘Man, it was pretty wild.’

‘No children yet?’

‘No, sir. But we aim to start some right soon now. We like about four, Sarah and me, we reckon about four’s a nice little family.’

‘When did you emigrate?’

‘June ’64. Legal, man. You can check.’

‘And your sister?’

‘She came later, after we’d started up here.’

‘How do you get on with her?’

Pink hands opened. ‘Man, you know about families,’ Sunshine said. ‘We’s fond of each other, that’s sure, but she goes her way, I go mine.’

‘Are Mrs Sunshine and she friends?’

Sunshine’s eyes wrinkled. He looked at his wife.

‘We’s pretty good friends, sir,’ Sarah said. ‘That gentleman says true, we do swap dresses.’

‘Thanks,’ Tallent said. ‘I like to be noticed.’

He lit a cigarette and blew stealthy smoke.

Gently leaned massively on the table, hands limp, eyes at a distance.

‘How long had your sister been friendly with Blackburn?’

Sunshine thought, then said, ‘Most of a year.’

‘There were others before that?’

‘Surely, man.’

‘Serious?’

Sunshine rocked his shoulders. ‘She’s not the marrying sort, you understand? Sadie, she’s one bitch of a woman. Wasn’t never a man yet who lasted with Sadie. One day she’ll find him, not right now.’

‘Blackburn wasn’t that man?’

‘No, sir. Not Tommy.’

‘Yet they’d lasted nearly a year.’

Sunshine’s mouth twisted. ‘I’d say that was over.’

‘How . . . over?’

‘Just that way. She was through, man. Tommy was out. They not speaking to each other any more.’

‘When did that happen?’

‘Oh . . . just lately.’

‘Since the sinking?’

Sunshine rolled his eyes.

Sarah Sunshine said, ‘I think she just tired of him.’ She kept her eyes on the table. ‘Maybe that ship sinking was just an excuse. She had enough of Tommy anyway.’

Tallent laughed. ‘It gets better,’ he said. ‘Soon now we’ll hear of a quarrel, threats.’

‘We don’t know of no quarrel, man,’ Sunshine said. ‘You don’t go making up things that ain’t so.’

‘Down, boy,’ Tallent said. His eyes glittered. ‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘The picture’s coming. This nympho black girl. Unstable. Next we find she owned a knife.’

Sarah Sunshine’s hand flew to her mouth.

‘So she did own a knife,’ Tallent said, getting up.

‘Oh gosh, I didn’t say so!’ Sarah Sunshine said. ‘I sure didn’t say she had a knife.’

‘Did she have a knife?’ Gently asked.

‘Man, this is crazy,’ Sunshine said.

‘Did she?’

‘I’m saying—’

Tallent leaned over the table. ‘You better answer him, boy,’ he said. ‘You better.’

‘I never did see her with one!’ Sunshine said. ‘That’s all I know – I can’t say more.’

‘You didn’t see it,’ Tallent said. ‘But you knew she had it – come on, come on. She had a knife.’

'I just—'

Tallent's fist doubled. Sarah Sunshine screamed. Sunshine's hands lifted to his face. Gently's finger touched Tallent's fist, pushed it away, pushed Tallent away. He beckoned towards the man who sat by the juke-box.

'You've something to tell me, Mr Taylor?' he said.

'Yes, sir,' Taylor mumbled. 'That was my knife. Sadie had my knife. She took it off me.'

He shambled to the table with dragging feet, eyes fearful of Tallent. He was sweating. He didn't sit down, stood uneasily, arms dangling.

'My knife,' he said. 'She took it, sir. I was horsing about. She took it.'

Gently looked at Sarah Sunshine. Sarah Sunshine looked at the table.

'You saw this?' Gently asked her.

Sarah Sunshine nodded. 'I saw it. One evening.'

'Just what happened?'

'Maybe Aaron was drunk. He didn't like Sadie going home with Tommy. Aaron pulled a knife.'

'Threatening Blackburn?'

'Yes, sir.' She went on nodding.

'I sure wasn't drunk,' Taylor said huskily. 'I wasn't going to hurt that man, sir. I just had enough of these goings-on. I don't hold with white men and black girls.'

'You cheeky git,' Tallent said.

'So what were your intentions?' Gently said.

'I just show him the knife,' Taylor said. 'I swear by the Lord I wasn't going to hurt him.'

'And Miss Sunshine took it – and kept it.'

'Yes, sir. She put it in her bag.'

'On Tuesday,' Tallent said. 'Say it was on Tuesday.'

'No, sir. All this happen two, three months back.'

'Shit,' Tallent said. He booted a chair-leg.

'Can you describe that knife?' Gently asked.

'Yes, sir. That's a poor old trashy sort of knife, got a no-good blade and a stripy handle.'

'Just like our knife,' Tallent said.

'We'll need you to identify it,' Gently said. 'We'll also need to know where you were on Tuesday evening, and you'd best think carefully before you answer.'

Taylor began shivering. 'I didn't kill him,' he said. 'I ain't that sort of person. Everyone'll tell you.'

'You just pulled a knife on him,' Tallent said. 'And we find it stuck in him. Some coincidence.'

'But I never did it!' Taylor whimpered. 'Lord, gosh, I hate that man, that's true. He take Sadie away, make her scorn me, I hope he finish up under a bus. But I don't go an' take a knife to him, not 'cept trying to scare him away. I ain't that sort. You just ask folk. I don't never give no trouble.'

'Man, that's the truth,' Sunshine said. 'Aaron don't make trouble.'

'Except once with a knife,' Tallent said. 'And once with a knife is too often.'

Sarah Sunshine said, 'Aaron was here in the club Tuesday evening.'

'Another friend,' Tallent said. 'Being here's no alibi for the likes of you.'

‘Were you here?’ Gently asked Taylor.

‘Yes, sir, most of the evening I was here.’

‘You saw Blackburn?’

‘Sure I saw him—’

‘Tell me about seeing Blackburn.’

Taylor’s pale tongue went over thick lips. ‘He came in here, had some drinks. Sarah was fixing him a meal. He just sits eating, watching the band.’

‘Alone?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Did Miss Sunshine speak to him?’

‘I didn’t see Sadie time I’m there.’

‘Did he speak to anyone?’

‘No, sir, nobody. ’Cepting Sarah when she was by.’

Gently glanced at Sarah Sunshine.

‘It surely is true, sir,’ she said. ‘Tommy came in like Aaron says, and I fixed him a meal. He didn’t talk much.’

‘You didn’t speak to him?’ Gently said to Taylor.

‘No, sir. Why should I speak to that man? I sit over there, long way off. I never did have much to do with him.’

‘You were alone?’

‘Sure I was alone.’

‘I can picture it,’ Tallent said. ‘This boy sitting alone. Mulling over what Blackburn’s done to him, across in the corner, figuring to himself.’

‘I ain’t figuring nothing,’ Taylor said. ‘Cain’t I just sit there, sir, if I want to? Cain’t I just be listening to the music and drinking my rum, like the other folks?’

‘Sure, why not?’ Tallent said. ‘Who knows how a bloke like you figures? One moment they’re grinning, stomping out the rhythm, the next cutting loose with hatchets, knives.’

‘We ain’t no different,’ Taylor said.

‘Don’t try kidding me, sonny,’ Tallent said. ‘I may not know how your kind ticks but I know how to make him tick nice.’

‘It just wasn’t that way, sir,’ Taylor said.

‘Yeah,’ Tallent said. ‘Like I said, I can picture it.’

‘Who else was here?’ Gently asked. ‘Anyone you knew with a grudge against Blackburn?’

‘No, sir,’ Taylor said. ‘There’s a whole lot of folks, but I don’t know they got a particular grudge.’

‘But Blackburn wasn’t popular with them any more?’

‘No, sir, he wasn’t popular.’

‘Did they show him he wasn’t?’

‘I guess they did, sir. They sure didn’t talk to him, act sociable.’

‘But they weren’t aggressive? Didn’t threaten him?’

‘No, sir. Nobody didn’t threaten.’

‘Nobody followed him when he left?’

Taylor licked his lips. ‘I cain’t say, sir.’

‘Why is that?’

Taylor was trembling again. ‘I guess I came out of here ’bout nine, sir. That man was still sitting there, having a word with Sarah. I don’t know what time he left.’

‘Isn’t that beautiful?’ Tallent said.

‘So where did you go then?’ Gently asked.

‘I didn’t go no place,’ Taylor said. ‘Sir, I just didn’t kill that man, I didn’t.’

‘All right,’ Gently said. ‘But you must have gone somewhere. Say between leaving here and 11 p.m.’

‘I sure was home,’ Taylor said. ‘You ask, sir. I was home. By 11 p.m.’

‘*By* 11 p.m.?’

‘Yes, sure, sir.’

‘It’s like robbing blind men,’ Tallent said. ‘We don’t care where you were at 11, dickhead. What were you doing in between?’

Taylor’s knees wobbled. ‘I just wasn’t no place. I went for a walk. No place at all.’

‘He’s lovely,’ Tallent said.

Taylor grabbed a chair-back. He held on. His eyes were staring.

‘You’d better sit down,’ Gently said.

Taylor half-sat, half-fell into the chair. His face was an ugly colour, sweat shone on the forehead and cheekbones. His breathing was quick. He sat in a sprawl, hands hanging, knees wide. His black eyes were pointing at Gently but they were empty, lids dragged.

‘Now,’ Gently said. ‘Take your time. If you didn’t kill him you needn’t be afraid. We’ll certainly find out who did kill him. We’ll perhaps find out quicker if you can help us.’

‘That sure is the truth,’ Sunshine said. ‘Don’t you get in no panic, Aaron.’

‘You relax, man,’ Sarah Sunshine said. ‘You go loose.’

‘Yeah,’ Tallent said. ‘With the tongue.’

Taylor’s breathing came slower. One of his big hands stirred.

‘When you left here,’ Gently said, ‘you went for a walk. Where did you go?’

‘I didn’t go no place,’ Taylor said thickly.

‘You just walked.’

‘Just walked.’

‘You often do that?’

Taylor nodded. ‘I ain’t got many friends any more. Things ain’t been so good with me, I don’t keep up, go around.’

‘So you walked for two hours?’

‘Yeh, walked. I didn’t kill him.’

‘He was on your mind.’

‘I’m thinking about him. I cain’t stand what he was doing.’

‘Didn’t you know Miss Sunshine had broken with him?’

Taylor’s hands lifted, clenched.

‘Yeah, I hear that, hear them talk about it.’

‘But you had to be sure?’

Taylor shuddered.

‘Let’s see,’ Gently said. ‘Brickfields Station must be just over the back here. Chiswick would be two or three stops down the line. Say a twenty-minute journey. If Blackburn left later than you, you could’ve been in Calonne Road before him. Behind one of those big plane trees. Watching Blackburn drive in.’

Taylor’s hands spread, gripped.

‘Were you watching?’ Gently said.

‘I didn’t, didn’t,’ Taylor whispered.

‘But you were watching?’ Gently said.

‘Oh Lord,’ Taylor said. ‘Lord.’

‘Was he watching,’ Tallent said. ‘He saw that creep drive up with Sadie, saw them going up to the flat. He goes in, sees Sadie’s bag, gets his knife out of the bag, goes in the bedroom, knifes Blackburn, threatens Sadie, gets to hell. Right man, right motive, right place, right time.’

‘No!’ Taylor cried. ‘It ain’t like that.’

‘You tell it different, boy,’ Tallent said.

‘Sadie ain’t with him!’

‘So why’s he dead?’

‘Oh Lord, oh Lord,’ Taylor said.

Gently said, ‘But you saw Blackburn arrive?’

‘Yes, sir, yes, sir,’ Taylor said.

‘Alone?’

‘Yes, yes, sir.’

‘He went in alone?’

‘Oh yes, sir, alone. Ain’t nobody else.’

‘What happened then?’

‘There ain’t nothing happened. I don’t stay ’round. I come away.’

‘You didn’t wait at all?’

‘No, sir, no, sir.’

Tallent clicked his tongue. ‘You got to prove it, boy,’ he said.

CHAPTER FOUR

ON HIS NOTE-PAD Stout had scribbled times that filled in Blackburn's programme to the time of his death. He'd arrived at the Coconut Grove soon after 6 and left again around 9 p.m. Taylor saw him drive up to the flat a short while before 9.30, which checked with the time given by the tenant Baker. ETD was 10 p.m. Journey-times, a bath, a change presumably filled the gap between 4 and 6 p.m.; Blackburn apparently had changed suits after leaving the office and the PM report noticed fresh talcum.

An unhurried programme, a leisurely meal, an early return to a pre-arranged assignation: nothing disturbing the smooth tenor till the knife lodged in Blackburn's back. Had the murder also been as smooth, a piece of cold-blooded planning?

They went through Sadie Sunshine's room. Sharkey Sunshine raised no objection. It was a small cubicle formed by the partitioning-off of an auxiliary room attached to the hall. It was brightly decorated in shocking pink with crimson cut-outs pasted on the walls, had turquoise curtains, a turquoise carpet and black furniture lined with gold. Silver-backed brushes lay on the dressing-table. A shelf of paperbacks included a Jean Genet. In a crowded wardrobe were several scanty dresses that glittered with sequins in silver and gold. On a bedside cabinet stood a framed half-length photograph of a young coloured woman in a low-cut gown, a woman with slanted eyes, an exquisite jawline and a mischievous, mocking smile. The room had a perfume. Beside the silver-backed brushes stood a green cut-glass bottle labelled *Après moi . . .*

'After her,' Tallent muttered, staring at it. 'Blackburn copped the deluge all right. Playing with black women, the creep. Nobody does that and gets away with it.'

'She was pretty all right, though,' Stout said. 'I reckon Blackburn had good taste.'

'You aren't born, sonny,' Tallent said.

'I don't know, sir,' Stout said. 'She looks nice.'

Tallent scowled at him, at the photograph.

'I don't know how you figure it, sir,' he said to Gently. 'But she had the knife, no getting round that. And she's the one who left town.'

'She had it once,' Gently said. 'She may not still have had it on Tuesday.'

'So Taylor had it,' Tallent said. 'She gave it back to him. One or both it has to be.'

Gently shrugged. 'Suppose she had broken with Blackburn.'

Tallent shook his head. 'I don't go for that. I'd say it was Sunshine trying to whitewash her, get the heat off his sister. But say it's true, she could still have made a feint to get at Blackburn, kidding him their deal was on again. Maybe setting it up with Taylor.'

'Would that be necessary?'

Tallent looked at Gently.

'Taylor could have done it anywhere,' Gently said. 'Outside the club, outside the

flat. It would have been easier, more anonymous.

'So,' Tallent said, 'eliminate Taylor. Say his being around was coincidence. That leaves the girl, which is how I read it. Unless Taylor did bust in like I said out there.'

'Not that,' Gently said. 'She wouldn't have run. Or Taylor wouldn't have let her live.'

'So she's alive, did run,' Tallent said. 'Taylor's out. Leaving her.'

'And the motive?'

'Christ knows,' Tallent said. 'Maybe she did lose someone on the ship. Maybe Blackburn did her wrong. Find her, we'll find the motive.'

'She just doesn't look a killer, sir,' Stout said. 'She looks . . . well . . . sort of nice-natured.'

'Yeah,' Tallent said. 'Only you can't trust her kind.'

'Well, I know some . . .' Stout began, then stopped.

Gently moved to the small window, looked out at the wet grime of the railway wall.

'A couple of things,' he said. 'One is that neither Osgood nor Grey were at the club here on Tuesday evening.'

'Does that mean anything, sir?' Tallent said.

'Probably not,' Gently said. 'The other is that Grey was so informative about Aaron Taylor and Miss Sunshine. Of course, it may have been on the level. Grey is slick enough to make a deal. But if he intended to hand us a wrong angle, then he's done a good job.'

'Yeah,' Tallent said, scowling at Gently's back. 'Only I don't see how it's a wrong angle. The facts check.'

'They'd have to,' Gently said. 'Otherwise there'd be no point in the attempt.'

'So,' Tallent said, 'where's the catch?'

Gently shrugged. 'There may not be one. Simply that while we're concentrating on the one angle we may be overlooking another.'

'Like some third party killed Blackburn?'

'That's the suggestion,' Gently said.

'Like maybe Grey, if his alibi's faked?'

'Grey may have had motive,' Gently said.

Tallent shook his head. 'I don't buy it, sir,' he said. 'Grey was too cocky. He knew he was safe. And he didn't know about the knife, about Taylor being at Chiswick, about Sadie Sunshine skipping, none of that. We found that out.'

'So we did,' Gently said.

'Well, it's all corroborative, sir,' Tallent said. 'And if the dabs here check with the dabs at the flat, sexy Sadie is in it up to her neck.'

'She'll certainly have explaining to do,' Gently said.

'Yeah,' Tallent said, smoothing his hands.

They drove back to HQ in the Sceptre, taking along with them the shivering Taylor. Stout stayed behind to get a list from the Sunshines of the customers they remembered being at the club on Tuesday evening. From Sharkey they'd also got two more photographs, one showing Sadie at full length, and from Sarah Sunshine a reluctant description of the clothes Sadie had been wearing when she left. For dab samples, Gently had taken the *Après moi* . . . and the silver-backed brushes.

At HQ they found Makin. The sad-faced man met them eagerly.

‘You were right, sir,’ he said to Gently. ‘Immigration did have those dabs on record—’

‘We know, we know,’ Tallent cut him off.

‘But I’ve got the woman’s identity, sir!’

‘Look,’ Tallent said, pushing the scent-bottle and brushes at him, ‘just take these and do your job on them.’

‘But . . .’ Makin said, grabbing the package.

‘Wait,’ Gently said. ‘What name did they give you?’

‘Sadie Sunshine,’ Makin said. ‘I have the address—’

‘He’s so bright,’ Tallent said. ‘Now he’s so bright.

They left Taylor in the charge-room while Tallent gave Sadie’s details to Information. They went to his office. From a locked drawer in a cabinet Tallent took a sheath-knife with a label tied to it. He laid the sheath-knife in a desk-tray on top of a pile of papers. He took his seat behind the desk, rang for Taylor to be brought in.

Taylor was brought. Tallent stopped him at the door.

‘Just stand there a minute, boy,’ he said. ‘This is my office. You take a good look at it. Maybe you’ll spend a lot of time in this room.’

‘Yes, sir, yes, sir,’ Taylor mumbled, his eyes rolling.

‘So you get to know it,’ Tallent said. ‘Keep looking.’

‘Yes, sir, I’m looking,’ Taylor said. ‘I’m looking, sir.’

‘That’s a good boy,’ Tallent said. ‘What do you see?’

Taylor gaped, his eyes still going. Then he spotted the knife. He grabbed his breath in a moan.

‘You’re good, boy,’ Tallent said. ‘You case a room real sharp. That your knife?’

‘Th-that sure is like it.’

‘Whadyamean – like it?’

Taylor gulped. ‘It’s mine.’

‘Yeah,’ Tallent said. ‘Okay.’ He picked the knife out of the tray.

‘Hold it,’ Gently said. He turned to Taylor. ‘These knives are pretty common,’ he said. ‘Were there any marks on the one you owned?’

‘I – I sure disremember, sir,’ Taylor said.

Gently took the knife. ‘Say on the blade?’

‘I – I cain’t remember the blade . . .’

‘Did you ever use your knife, say, for lifting tacks?’

Taylor’s eyes stilled. ‘Yeh – yeh!’ he said. ‘I did do that, sir. I pulled up some tacks with it. There’s surely a nick some place on the blade.’

Gently handed him the knife. ‘Like this?’ he said.

‘Oh gosh, yes – that’s the very same knife!’

Tallent took the knife again, laid it on the desk.

‘Take a seat, sonny,’ he said.

Taylor slumped on a chair.

‘Now,’ Tallent said. ‘Fast answers, boy. That’s your knife. We found it in Blackburn. If you didn’t stick it there, tell us who did.’

‘But sir, if I knew—’

‘You know,’ Tallent said. ‘That’s one sure thing. You know who did it.’

‘I’m telling you, sir—’

‘It has to be you.’

‘No, sir, I never—’

‘Then it was your ex-girlfriend.’

Taylor stared at Tallent huge-eyed for a space, then hid his face in his massive hands.

‘Oh Lord, no, no!’ he snivelled in a falsetto. ‘That cain’t be true. That cain’t be true.’

‘Still love her, do you, boy?’ Tallent jeered. ‘You better start facing facts, sonny. She’s a no-good whoring promiscuous bitch, and a no-hoper like you couldn’t run her.’

‘You just don’t talk that way!’ Taylor screamed, jumping up.

‘Siddown,’ Tallent said, striking the desk. ‘I talk any way I please in here, sonny. You better learn that good and fast.’

‘Sadie ain’t what you’re saying – she ain’t.’

‘Are you going to sit down?’ Tallent said.

‘She ain’t bad. She ain’t a whore.’

‘Listen,’ Tallent said. ‘My hands don’t bruise easily.’

Taylor sat.

‘That’s better,’ Tallent said. ‘Just don’t go hysterical on this policeman. Especially with a knife lying on the desk. It might give me excuses. I might need them.’

‘Oh Lord, she never did that,’ Taylor said.

‘You hope,’ Tallent said. ‘But you don’t sound happy.’

‘She never, never did,’ Taylor said. He covered his face with his hands again.

Tallent picked up the knife. He began paring his nails with it.

‘Let’s look at some points, boy,’ he said. ‘Sadie wasn’t in the club Tuesday evening. So like where would Sadie be?’

Taylor groaned.

‘That’s right,’ Tallent said. ‘Where was Sadie when she wasn’t at home? With the stink of her scent all over Blackburn’s flat, and her dabs there too – especially in the bedroom?’

‘But she is washed-up with that man—’ Taylor quavered.

Tallent laughed. ‘I heard Sharkey saying it. I heard Sharkey saying she was in the club all evening – but you didn’t see her there, did you, boy?’

‘I know she ain’t been seeing that Blackburn.’

‘You weren’t so certain on Tuesday, sonny.’

‘But she ain’t been with him before that – ten days, a fortnight she ain’t been there.’

‘Now we’re learning,’ Tallent said. ‘So you’ve been watching that flat, have you? Every night, under the limetree. Angry Aaron, the boy with the knife.’

‘I didn’t have no knife!’

‘I was forgetting,’ Tallent said. ‘Sadie had the knife. In her handbag. For two, three months. Always took it to Blackburn’s flat.’

‘She didn’t . . .’ Taylor hesitated, fingers on his sweaty brow.

‘Didn’t have the knife?’

‘What for would she have it . . . all that time . . . in her handbag?’

‘Yeah,’ Tallent said. ‘Yeah, that’s nice. Keep pushing your brains with your fingers, sonny. Maybe she didn’t have it at that. Why keep a knife like that in a handbag? So what would she do with it?’

‘I sure don’t know—’

‘Oh, come on, now,’ Tallent said.

‘I don’t know!’ Taylor said. ‘I guess she got rid of it.’

‘Sure she did,’ Tallent said. ‘Back to you.’

‘She never did that!’

‘Oh yes,’ Tallent said. ‘That nice girl Sadie didn’t keep your knife. She might have had it off you when you flipped, but then she gave it back. It checks, boy.’

‘No,’ Taylor said. ‘No, sir.’

‘Sure, sure,’ Tallent said. ‘But it checks. You had that knife, that knife killed Blackburn, you were there. It checks.’

Taylor sobbed into his hands.

‘Let’s reconstruct it,’ Tallent said. ‘There wasn’t any break between Sadie and Blackburn, that’s a load of Sharkey’s eyewash. She was still cutting it out at the flat, and you knew she was, because you were watching. And Tuesday night you flipped again, just the way you flipped before. You slid round the back and up the steps and through the flat, and caught them at it. So you cut him. It was dark in there. She wouldn’t know anything till Blackburn flaked on her. By then you were out of the flat and clear, and she maybe doesn’t know now who did it. She could guess, and she saw the knife-handle, but she didn’t know. And she didn’t want to be questioned. How am I doing, sonny?’

‘No, no!’ Taylor sobbed.

‘Yeah, it’s understandable,’ Tallent said. ‘You had provocation, that’s plain enough. The jury may recommend mercy on that.’

‘You’s just so wrong!’ Taylor sobbed.

‘No, I’m not wrong,’ Tallent said. ‘You can’t hide these things, boy. That’s the mistake all killers make. So now we know, now it’s out, you better play along and tell me everything. That way you’ll make me a friend, boy, and you sure need a friend just now. Come on, now. You’ll feel better.’

‘But I ain’t d’guilty one!’ Taylor sobbed.

‘So you and Sadie did it,’ Tallent said. ‘That’s okay with me, I can understand. You’ll do all right. You tell me.’

‘Oh Lord, no, no!’ Taylor sobbed. ‘It ain’t so. None of it ain’t so.’

‘You stupid bloody fool,’ Tallent said. ‘And me here trying to be your friend.’

He slammed the knife back in the tray.

‘Anything to ask him, sir?’ he said to Gently.

Gently shook his head. ‘Nothing. You can turn him loose now.’

Tallent went stiff. ‘Turn him loose?’

Gently nodded. ‘And provide him with transport.’

Tallent stared a long time at Gently. His eyes dropped. ‘All right,’ he said to the attending constable. ‘You heard what the Superintendent said.’

The door closed behind Taylor. Tallent got up and went to the window. In the M/T yard outside the window somebody was revving a car engine. Tallent threw up the window, bawled through it. The engine was cut. He closed the window. He came back into the room, stood staring at a duty roster that was pinned to the door with red-capped drawing-pins.

‘You didn’t like how I handled that, sir,’ he said. ‘Perhaps you haven’t liked how I’ve handled any of the case up to now.’

Gently said nothing.

‘Perhaps,’ Tallent said, ‘I should ask to be taken off this case. Let you run it how you want. Maybe that would be best for everyone.’

‘Come and sit down again,’ Gently said.

‘I know pretty well,’ Tallent said, ‘when I’m not wanted. You don’t want me. You’ve been against me ever since you walked in. I could feel it. We don’t click. You think I’m just a loud-mouthed bastard. I can’t do anything right, for you. And you’re the boss. So I’d better drop out.’

‘I can’t talk to your back,’ Gently said.

‘You can’t talk to me, period,’ Tallent said. ‘We don’t have a common bloody language, sir, just between us and the four walls.’

‘Well, come and sit down,’ Gently said.

‘I want to have this out, sir,’ Tallent said.

‘Of course, we both do,’ Gently said. ‘Come and sit down.’

Tallent stalked to his chair.

Gently scratched a light for his pipe, blew a couple of rings towards Tallent.

‘You were a boxing man,’ he said. ‘Haven’t I seen your name on the area championship shield?’

‘So what?’ Tallent said.

‘So that’s a high standard,’ Gently said. ‘It takes more than beef to become a champion. It takes discipline, intelligence, the imagination to read a fight, the skill to exploit an opponent’s style. A good champion is a good policeman.’

‘I was a bad champion,’ Tallent said.

‘I didn’t see your fights,’ Gently said. ‘I’d say you were a good one, just meeting you today for the first time.’

‘So I’ve gone back,’ Tallent said. ‘I was a good champion, I’m a bad policeman.’

‘That isn’t my reading,’ Gently said. ‘I’ve been wondering how you’d shape if you joined us.’

‘If I joined who?’ Tallent’s small eyes jumped.

‘If you joined us,’ Gently said. ‘That’s a possible step for an ambitious officer. We’re always short of likely material.’

Tallent stared at him, hook-browed.

‘Try pulling the other one, sir,’ he said.

‘I’m quite serious,’ Gently said. ‘And I happen to know we have vacancies.’

Tallent rose again, stood facing the window.

‘Look, sir,’ he said. ‘I don’t know your angle. I’m not the sort of bloke who’d fit in the Central Office, and you bloody well know I’m not that sort. I’m all right. I’m a good cop. I know my job. I run a quiet manor. But that’s all I am, a good cop. They wouldn’t look at me up there.’

Gently smoked, blew rings.

‘Yeah, they wouldn’t look at me,’ Tallent said. ‘And you know why. I play it old-fashioned. I aim to make the villains jump. So you don’t like it, they wouldn’t like it, but it keeps the peace pretty good. And it’ll get a conviction on the Blackburn case while the pussyfoots are still wondering.’

Gently kept smoking.

‘No,’ Tallent said. ‘I don’t want your recommendation. I’m no class, I know that. I’m where I belong, a working policeman. I’ll stick to that, doing my job, getting results the way I know. Maybe I’m just a bloody loud-mouth, but the record says I get by.’

‘Were you in the services?’ Gently asked.

‘Yeah,’ Tallent said. ‘Other ranks.’

‘Did you see any fighting?’

Tallent glared at the window. ‘Once,’ he said. ‘Just the once.’

‘Where was that?’

Tallent’s hands were tightening. ‘You wouldn’t want to know, sir,’ he said. ‘Or maybe you would. Maybe it explains things. Maybe you’d think it had me tagged.’

‘You don’t have to tell me,’ Gently said.

‘No,’ Tallent said. ‘I don’t have to.’

He came back from the window, dropped in his chair. He sat with head slanted forward.

‘I don’t like black people,’ he said. ‘They don’t like me. Yeah, I’m prejudiced as hell. There was a time they didn’t bother me. Now they do. So there’s a reason.’

‘What happened during the war?’

Tallent shook his head. ‘I’m a damn fool to talk about this,’ he said. ‘It’s not on my record, here or at Uxbridge, and telling you won’t do me any good. I was a Corporal-fitter in the airworks.’

‘Overseas?’

‘In this country. All the war. Bomber Command. I did a circuit in 3 Group. End of the war we were shifted around, misemployed, that sort of caper. I got my ticket in ’46. My last station was Blackbushe.’ He glanced at Gently. ‘Mean anything?’

‘Not so far,’ Gently said.

‘I guess it wouldn’t,’ Tallent said. ‘Somehow it never made the papers. We had black servicemen there, West Indians, maybe a couple of hundred of them. There was trouble. We armed up, drove them out of camp.’

He locked his fingers together, squeezed.

‘It was me who triggered it off,’ he said. ‘One lunchtime a black guy beat me up. After that came the riot.’

‘I see,’ Gently said. He smoked.

‘No, you don’t see,’ Tallent said, squeezing. ‘When I walked into that bloody canteen at lunchtime it was like walking into a bucket of lightning. There were eighty, a hundred black guys standing around, one or two white blokes sitting at the tables. It stank of violence. You could smell it. It made the hair prickle on your head. I wouldn’t back out. I walked to the counter. A bloody great black thug came up and kneed me. Then he butted my face and I went down and he stood there kicking me, spitting on me. And none of the white blokes lifted a finger. Like they couldn’t see what was going on.’

Tallent breathed tightly, dragging, squeezing.

‘Next day we made the coshes,’ he said. ‘Loaded hose, bound with wire. All the workshops were turning them out. Lunchtime nobody went near the canteen. The black guys were strutting around like heroes. Then after work we set about them, sent them running and screaming like pigs. And I fixed the one that gave me the kicking. I cut him down. I smashed his skull and his ribs and his knees. He couldn’t run. He couldn’t walk. All he could do was grovel and scream. Maybe he’s going on crutches still. The rest we drove out into the fields. That was it. They never came back.’

‘And you live with it,’ Gently said.

‘Yeah,’ Tallent said. ‘You have to live with it. When I see a black face it all comes up, I have to beat him to the punch. Before that happened it was okay, I could

see one of them and let him live. But not now. The beating spoiled me. One of us has to be the boss.'

'Beating him didn't get it out of your system.'

Tallent pulled his hands apart. 'Nope,' he said.

'Would beating all of them do it?'

'Nope,' Tallent said. 'Not beating all of them.'

Gently smoked. Tallent stared at his hands, leaning forward towards the desk. His lips were thin and pale. He pulled his breath in in snatches.

'So I'm warped,' he said. 'I can't help it. What I've been through would warp any man. If you want me off this case, okay I can understand your point.'

'You kept going into that canteen,' Gently said.

'Yeah,' Tallent said. 'Always a sucker.'

'So you'd better keep going with this case,' Gently said.

Tallent's head jerked. He said nothing.

'Right,' Gently said. 'Stout will be coming up with that list of club members soon. I'd like you to get on with questioning them, seeing what they remember about Tuesday evening.'

Tallent just nodded. 'Do I check Osgood's and Grey's alibis?' he asked.

'Put someone on Osgood's,' Gently said. He puffed. 'Mrs Grey I'll talk to myself.'

CHAPTER FIVE

OSGOOD'S FLAT WAS in Acton. Grey lived across the river in Richmond. Before proceeding there Gently found a parking place near a cafeteria and served himself a pseudo-food snack and a glass of possibly genuine milk. The cashier was a smiling West Indian. Gently deliberately handed her short money.

'Ducks,' she said, chocolate eyes reproachful, 'I just cain't get four-and-tenpence out of two florins.'

Gently added the tenpence.

'It's still raining,' he said.

She rolled her eyes. 'Does it ever stop?'

'It's been known,' Gently said. 'They have records.'

She gave a soft little chuckling laugh.

He drove over Kew Bridge, below which the Thames and its boats looked seedy, by the gardens, into Richmond, out again towards Petersham. Hilldrop Road was a quiet cul-de-sac of detached houses in shrubby gardens. They were of astringent thirties architecture with sharp gable-fronts and discreet half-timbering. Grey's house, 27, stood on a slope among dripping laburnums. A gravelled drive swung sharply up to it and ended abruptly at garage doors. The doors were open. A maroon 3.8S Jaguar with a current date-letter stood inside.

Gently parked, got out, tugged a wrought-iron bell-pull. Westminster chimes sounded within. Shuffling steps approached the door, the door opened, revealed a raddled-faced woman.

'Yays?' she said.

'Chief Superintendent Gently. I want to speak to Mrs Grey.'

'You ain't off a paper?'

'I'm a policeman.'

'Ow,' the woman said. 'Well, I'll see.'

She shut the door again. A minute passed. The door was reopened.

'All right,' she said. 'You're to come in and wait. Mrs Grey ain't finished dressing.'

He followed her through a polished-floored hall into a large, overheated lounge. She stared at him severely for a few moments, then shuffled out, leaving the door ajar. Gently shrugged to himself, moved about the room. It was furnished with a suite in imitation black leather. On one wall a break-front bar stood open revealing bottles and glasses against a mirror panel. There were no books. A large TV was flanked by a radiogram in an ebony case. A long, low coffee-table supported big, crystal ashtrays, had glossy magazines in the tidy beneath. On the walls hung coloured prints of vintage cars. The stagnant air smelled of whisky, tobacco-smoke.

Crisp steps crossed the hall and a woman stood in the doorway. She was a slight-figured blonde in a tailored dress of oatmeal tweed. She was aged thirty-five to forty,

wore her hair in a tight turban, had delicate, miniature features and sharp, gold-hazel eyes.

'Are you the policeman?' she asked coldly.

Gently repeated his name to her.

'Oh, I see,' she said. 'The top brass. I suppose you know they were here all yesterday evening.'

'This has to do with another matter,' Gently said. 'Just routine inquiries, Mrs Grey.'

'Another matter.' She made a mouth. 'There are really no depths to Freddy, are there?'

She closed the door, went across to the bar, began confecting herself a drink. Lean shoulders showed through the close-cut back of the oatmeal dress. She wore small cairngorm eardrops in pierced ears and wedge-toed camelskin shoes. Her voice was accentless and clear. She had an elusive, heather-like perfume.

'I hope this won't take long,' she said. 'I'm going down town shopping. Drink?'

'No, thank you,' Gently said. 'I'd like to smoke if I may.'

'Help yourself.' She waved to a cigarette-box.

'I smoke a pipe.'

'That's okay. Freddy likes a stronger smoke – oh, I shouldn't tell you that, should I?'

Gently glanced at the cigarette-box, lofted a shoulder.

'Do you want to visit your husband, Mrs Grey?' he asked.

'Should I?'

She carried her drink to the long settee and sat, tucking in her legs. Gently sat in the chair nearest.

'It's entirely up to you,' he said.

'I mean, would it help him?' she asked, sipping. 'If it would help, I owe him that much.'

'Otherwise, you don't want to see him?'

'Heavens no. Let him stew.'

'You are not on good terms with him?'

'Not, as you say. I'm scarcely on any terms at all.'

She looked angrily across at a photograph of Grey which stood propped on a corner-bracket.

'This being about the last straw,' she said. 'Him getting picked up by the police. I've been insulted every way by that man. I've nearly walked out a dozen times. I don't care, you can know it. Freddy and I are strictly kaput.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' Gently said.

'No need to be sorry,' said Mrs Grey. 'We've been kaput for a long time now. There's nothing novel about the sensation.'

'Yet you're still friends with him,' Gently said.

'Friends.' She laughed. 'He still foots the bill.'

'You go about with him.'

'You wouldn't notice it.'

'This week, for example.'

Mrs Grey was silent. She shifted her legs, sipped the drink.

'This isn't that immigration business,' she said. 'You want to know where Freddy was on Tuesday – Tuesday evening. Am I right?'

‘A routine inquiry,’ Gently shrugged.

‘Oh, very routine,’ Mrs Grey said. ‘That’s why a big noise from the Yard comes to see me. You don’t have enough to do up there.’ She finished the drink. She shivered. ‘I know what happened to Tommy,’ she said. ‘I saw that paragraph in the *Evening News*, heard them talking about it last night.’

‘Heard who talking about it?’

‘The police.’

‘How did your husband take the news?’

‘He’d seen it earlier. He showed me the paper. He wasn’t crying, I can tell you that.’

‘Did he talk to you about it?’

‘Oh yes. He said the illegals had done for Tommy. That was because of the *Naxos Island* and Tommy knowing it wasn’t safe.’

‘Your husband knew they’d done it?’

Mrs Grey hesitated. ‘No, he didn’t say he knew it. But the way he spoke he was quite certain. Maybe he did know. He sees plenty of them.’

‘Did he see them yesterday?’

She shook her head slowly. ‘He was at the office till early afternoon, then he came home to show me the paper. Wanted to make quite sure I saw it.’

‘Why, Mrs Grey?’

She twirled the glass, made a movement with her thin shoulders.

‘He didn’t do it,’ she said. ‘You know that. He was with me from teatime Tuesday, right through. That’s his alibi, isn’t it? And it’s true. Quite true. He had tickets for the Aldwych, he’d rung me about it, and he’d booked a table at the Waldorf for supper afterwards.’

‘And you carried out that programme?’

‘Yes, all of it.’

‘Did you enjoy the play at the Aldwych?’

‘Not much,’ she said. ‘It was called *The Criminals.* Maybe it would make a night out for you.’

‘Did your husband like it?’

‘Stop foxing,’ she said. ‘We really did go there, see the play. Freddy wasn’t out of my sight for a moment. He even took me to the bar with him.’

‘Doesn’t he usually?’

‘Well, he doesn’t make a point of it.’

‘But Tuesday he did.’

‘I suppose you’d say that. I would have settled for a quiet smoke, but Freddy insisted I had a drink.’

‘Who did you meet there?’

‘Nobody,’ she said. ‘But they’ll remember us, don’t worry. Freddy knocked my glass out of my hand, then made a fuss about paying up.’

‘What time did you leave there?’

‘Elevenish.’

‘Any memorable accidents at the Waldorf?’

‘Didn’t need any,’ she said. ‘They know us there. Just ask the head-waiter. He’ll tell you.’

‘And you left?’

‘About oneish, say quarter to. We were home here before half-past one. Then we

went to bed in the same bed, and that's that. He couldn't have done it.'

'Did he make a phone-call during the evening?'

'No.'

'Talk to anyone?'

'The barman. The waiter.

'What did he tell you about the ticket stubs?'

'Before they took him away he told me to keep them in a safe place.'

'And this was all of a pattern,' Gently said, 'with your other nights-out – the usual thing?'

She made the glass ting with a flick of her nail.

'Christ,' she said. 'It was the first time in months.'

'So going back a little,' Gently said. 'Now we seem to have established your husband didn't murder Blackburn. You said he wanted to make sure you saw the notice in the paper, and I asked you why. I'm asking you again.'

She got up, carried her glass to the bar, began putting together a fresh drink.

'It's a question of how much I owe Freddy,' she said. 'I like to be square. I don't owe him so much. Maybe playing ball about his alibi clears me. I don't want him sent up for what he didn't do.'

'So,' Gently said.

She swizzled the drink.

'Yes, he wanted to rub it in,' she said. 'Because Tommy had slept with me. Because Freddy tried to thump him for it. Because it was Tommy who thumped Freddy. He hated Tommy.'

She drank the drink standing at the bar then came back to the settee. She took a cigarette from the cigarette-box. Gently lit it for her. Her fingers were trembling. She sat down again, legs slanted, took some drags at the cigarette. Gently had stuck his pipe in his mouth but he was sucking on it empty.

'I had plenty of reason,' Mrs Grey said. 'Don't think I'm a nympho, something of that sort. It just isn't me, doing that. Once upon a time I wouldn't have dreamed of it. But then I thought Freddy loved me. He did love me, I'm sure of that. Once he loved me. Perhaps I should have had a child, only he didn't want it, so I didn't.'

'How long have you been married?' Gently asked.

'Oh, four years, nearly five. I met him soon after he'd gone in with Tommy. He was different in those days, honestly different. I wanted a job. I was a typist, liked to call myself a secretary. I was sent to Tommy. He took me on. So I met Freddy. He did love me.'

'You knew what their business was?'

'Yes. Sugar. If it was anything different, I didn't know it. Shipping sugar was what we dealt with in the office, and return cargoes, mostly machinery. Return cargoes were the big headache. The sugar side ran itself. We had twelve-month contracts with Hamish McClure to carry a fixed tonnage out of Kingston.'

'Did you know your husband associated with black women?'

Her mouth twisted. 'Not at first.'

'How do you mean?'

'At first he loved me. We did everything together. For a time.'

'Then?'

'Then we didn't. I had to go home for some weeks to nurse my mother. It got so

he wasn't at home in the evenings when I phoned, said he was out chasing business. Some business.'

'Other women?'

'He was going around with Tommy and Ozzie. I always knew Tommy had black friends, he was in business with some of them at Brickfields. He had a woman, I don't know her name, but she was beautiful. Plenty of that went on, you bet. Freddy was certainly getting his share. And after Mother died, everything changed. I saw less and less of Freddy in the evenings. And he didn't want me, you know? It was after that. He stopped loving me.'

She ungummed the cigarette from her lips, ran her tongue over them, drew more smoke.

'Did you row him?' Gently asked.

'Of course. I was hurt. Bitterly hurt.'

'It did no good.'

'None at all. It was suddenly too late. He'd gone away.'

'You tried other things?'

She smiled tremulously. 'Yes, but they weren't any good either. It's no use, just no use. When they stop loving they stop. You can be Helen and the Queen of Sheba, it doesn't matter. They're through.'

'But something particular happened,' Gently said. 'It wasn't just neglect that drove you to Blackburn.'

The cigarette stuck again. A piece tore from it when she tugged it from her lip.

'One day I saw him with her,' she said.

'Who?'

'A black woman. I don't know.'

'Where was this?'

'She was in the car with him. Driving down Regent Street, bold as brass.'

'You saw her face?'

'No. Not properly. She was nicely dressed, had a lacy hat. The cat's whisker. Freddy was grinning. Looked like he was on top of the world.'

'That didn't prove anything,' Gently said. 'She may have been a client, or a client's wife.'

'Yes, that's what I told myself,' Mrs Grey said. 'Only I asked him about it. And he lied.'

'You asked him outright?'

'I'm not daft. I asked him if he'd made a trip that day. He said no, he hadn't left the office, they'd had some trouble with bills of lading. So then I knew. And something came over me. Maybe it was then I stopped loving him. It's the way you said, neglect couldn't do it, not even that woman. It was the lie.'

'Can you date that day?' Gently asked.

'Yes. The twenty-second of April.'

'But you didn't recognize the woman?'

She shook her head. 'I don't know any black people, anyway.'

'You'd seen the woman who was friendly with Blackburn.'

Mrs Grey paused, watching her cigarette-butt.

'I thought of her,' she said. 'She was very lovely. Somehow I didn't think of her as just sleeping around.'

'But was it she with your husband?'

‘I can’t be certain. You know how it is with people in cars. Unless you know them well you haven’t a chance. I can only swear to the car and Freddy.’

Gently sucked emptiness through his pipe.

‘Tell me the rest of it,’ he said.

She got rid of her butt in a crystal ashtray.

‘I don’t know I’m so very proud of that,’ she said. ‘Tommy was nice, but I wasn’t in love with him. He knew what was going on all right. Maybe he thought I’d be an easy lay, and he was right. I just didn’t care.’

‘He took the initiative?’ Gently asked.

Her shoulders hunched. ‘Do men ever do that? Unless a woman shows a flicker of green it never occurs to a man to try. So I gave him the flicker. Not very serious. Probably I only wanted sympathy. Then when he kissed me as though he liked me I felt warm and grateful and it went on from there.’

‘Where did you meet?’

‘Here mostly. Tommy often called round here anyway. He liked being a bachelor, didn’t like being lonely. Neighbours were used to seeing his car here. Once or twice we went out on the town, but I was mortally afraid in case we ran into Freddy. Tommy would laugh, tell me not to worry, he was pretty certain we were safe from Freddy.’

‘Did you fish a bit then?’

She nodded. ‘But men have a beastly code, of course. Or else he genuinely didn’t know who the woman was, just maybe knew where Freddy went to meet her.’

‘What about his own woman?’

‘Oh, he didn’t deny her. Just grinned and said she wasn’t jealous.’

‘Did you ever meet her when you were with him?’

‘No. Not to my knowledge, anyway.’

Gently sucked. ‘Let me put it together. Blackburn met you when your husband was absent. Blackburn knew when your husband was absent, knew where he was, though perhaps not who with. He knew you wouldn’t meet him if you went down West. And while Blackburn was with you, of course, he wasn’t with his black woman. Did you ever add that lot together?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I thought of most things. And I’m pretty sure Tommy would have done too, if Freddy had been messing about with his girl. Tommy was fond of her, I could sense that. He wasn’t just getting a kick out of her being black. Whoever Freddy’s woman was he was certain it wasn’t her, or he’d have thumped Freddy a lot sooner.’

‘She could have deceived Blackburn. It’s not unknown.’

‘No.’ Mrs Grey frowned. ‘I never actually met her.’

‘He wasn’t so fond of her that he didn’t play with you.’

‘That’s how men are. I still think he was fond of her.’

‘It could have been her.’

‘All right,’ Mrs Grey said. ‘It could have been. Just at the time I didn’t think it likely. But women are bitches and men are swine, so it could have been her, and I wish her the joy of him.’ Her eyes thrust at Gently’s. ‘Who is she?’

Gently shrugged. ‘We haven’t talked to her yet.’

‘But you know who she is?’

‘We know.’

‘I’d like to talk to her, too,’ Mrs Grey said.

She stared for a long while at the coffee-table, her unusual eyes big.

'You think she did it, don't you?' she said slowly. 'That's why you want her tied in with Freddy. He hated Tommy. If she was stuck on Freddy she might just have done it to please him. And she tipped him off. He knew she was going to do it. That's why he took me out on Tuesday. He's in it with her, an accessory. His alibi doesn't mean a thing.'

'You're going ahead too fast,' Gently said. 'We haven't talked to the girl yet.'

'Oh God,' Mrs Grey said. 'My husband's a murderer. Freddy. He let her kill him.'

'Did she look like a murderer to you?'

Her dazed eyes turned to him.

'None of this is proved,' Gently said. 'Character counts for something, you know.'

'My husband's character!'

'Hers.'

'An immigrant. You don't know what they'll do.'

'That wasn't the way you talked at first.'

'No.' She shook her head. 'It fits. It fits. Freddy is cruel. And he's clever. I knew he'd get even with Tommy somehow. He hated him before this business with me, that only put the tin hat on it.'

'What was his other grievance?'

'Money,' she said. 'Always that. Tommy had it. Freddy wanted it. Said Tommy never paid him enough.'

'Does Blackburn's death benefit your husband?'

'My God,' she said. 'Don't you know? If one of them dies, it goes to the other. Freddy owns the business now.'

She lit another cigarette and sat hunched over it, her crossed arms against her stomach.

'That's how it was,' she said dully. 'I know. Freddy. That's how it was.'

'Where did Osgood come into it?' Gently asked. 'Was he included in the reversion arrangement?'

'Oh, Ozzie.' She tossed her head. 'He's not really a partner, you know.'

'What do you know about him?'

'You can forget him. Ozzie's all right. Just simple. He wouldn't plan anything deep, rotten. It isn't in him. Either way.'

'He's implicated in the immigration offences.'

'He'd hardly know he was doing wrong.'

'Had he a grievance?'

'Too dumb.'

'He seems to be hiding something,' Gently said.

Mrs Grey kneaded her arms, breathed smoke through little nostrils.

'Forget him,' she said. 'He isn't in the picture. You just scare him, that's all. Ozzie's a stupid. I like him. There's nothing vicious about Ozzie. If Ozzie ever stuck a knife in someone he'd give himself up to the next policeman.'

'Could he have known if your husband had planned anything?'

Scornfully she shook her head.

'Or the identity of the other woman?'

Mrs Grey breathed smoke.

‘He could have known that,’ she admitted. ‘He went around with Freddy and Tommy. They met their black friends in Brickfields. Yes, I didn’t think of Ozzie.’

‘Then perhaps he knows more,’ Gently said. ‘He has an alibi for Tuesday too.’

She thought about that, shook her head again.

‘If he’d known, he would have warned Tommy,’ she said. ‘No. There’s only one man in this. You may not prove it, but I know. I remember the way he showed me that paper. Freddy. He did it, let it be done.’

‘What exactly happened when he found you with Blackburn?’

‘We were in bed.’

She closed her eyes.

‘He came back early. Christ knows why. Perhaps his woman had the curse.’

‘Then?’

‘He yanked Tommy out of bed. He’d put all the lights on when he came in. He swore at Tommy, punching him about. Tommy was dazed at first. He was naked.’

‘But he overcame your husband?’

‘Tommy was a boxer, I don’t think Freddy really hurt him. Tommy kept moving, swaying about, taking the gyp out of Freddy’s punches. Then he sort of jolted him on the side of the jaw and Freddy went down like a sack of potatoes.’

‘He Henry Coopered him,’ Gently said.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘He hit him like that. And Freddy dropped like Cassius Clay and didn’t come round for five minutes. I was scared. We got our clothes on. There was blood dribbling from Freddy’s mouth. Tommy put him on the bed and undid his collar. When he came round, he looked like the devil.’

‘Did Blackburn clear out then?’

She shook her head. ‘He knew he’d have to talk some sense into Freddy. The way Freddy was when he came round he’d probably have gone for me, perhaps killed me. Tommy said all right, so he was laying me, why should that worry Freddy? Freddy was getting his somewhere else, he hadn’t touched me for months. Freddy said that didn’t excuse anything, I was still his wife whether he had me or not. Tommy told him I was human all the same. Freddy said that was his business, not Tommy’s. And they went on talking around like that, you know, saying things that didn’t mean anything, on and on. Then we moved down here and sat around, getting drunk. In the end we were drunk. Tommy spent the night on this settee. In the morning he was gone. Freddy had a hangover, wasn’t talking.’

‘Were any names dropped during this session?’

She drew smoke a couple of times.

‘Freddy sneered about Tommy’s black girlfriend, but I don’t remember any names.’

‘How was your husband’s woman referred to?’

‘I don’t think she was, except indirectly. I’m sure now Tommy didn’t know who she was, he talked as though Freddy were just playing the girls.’

‘You got no impression they might be sharing the same woman.’

‘No. Freddy’s too clever to let anything drop. Even when he’s angry, you don’t get past him. He’s got a cold compartment somewhere inside. And that was about that where we were concerned. We’ve made no pretence with each other ever since. Tommy opted out. I wasn’t in love with him. Freddy and I were just waiting for the break-up. This is obviously it.’ She breathed smoke harshly. ‘In fact, I’m on my way to my lawyer’s.’

‘I see,’ Gently said.
Her shoulders lifted.
‘You’ll be seeing Freddy, of course,’ she said.
‘I’ll be seeing him.’
Her strange eyes found Gently’s. ‘Tell him I know,’ she said. ‘Just that.’

CHAPTER SIX

TALLENT WAS ABSENT on his statement-taking when Gently returned to HQ, but the Yard man found Makin sitting at Tallent's desk with a foolscap list in front of him.

'Take a look, sir,' he said to Gently. 'This came in a moment ago.'

Gently took the sheet. It was from the Immigration Department. It listed the illegals believed by Kingston to have sailed on the *Naxos Island's* last voyage. They were twenty-two. Alongside six of them Immigration had noted relatives living in the UK. Five lived out of London in Leeds, Manchester and Birmingham. One lived in London. It was Sunshine. He'd lost a brother, Sonny, aged eighteen.

'I'd say that tied things up a bit, sir,' Makin said. 'It was his sister's dabs in the flat all right. And her having the knife, too, that was jam. I reckon her and her brother fixed it between them.'

'It's tempting,' Gently said. And I can add another motive.'

He sketched his interview with Mrs Grey.

'Oh, very sweet, sir,' Makin said. 'Grey egging them on. Then fingering Taylor.'

'You think that's it?' Gently said.

He lit his pipe, went to sit down.

'Well, it adds together, sir,' Makin said cautiously. 'We're short of proof, but it adds together.'

Gently puffed, said, 'Let's add it together. Grey hated Blackburn for personal reasons. He also stood to take over the business if Blackburn predeceased him. Sadie Sunshine is Blackburn's mistress but she's begun to take up with Grey. She loves Grey, but the affair is kept secret, say because Grey's married, or because they're afraid of Blackburn. Comes the *Naxos Island* sinking. Grey sees his chance here. There's feeling against Blackburn among the black community, and the Sunshines have lost a kid brother on the ship. Grey urges them to be avenged. He puts special pressure on Sadie, who loves him. The Sunshines kill Blackburn. Sadie has tipped Grey, who sets up an alibi we can't break. Sadie loses her nerve and runs. Taylor's knife was used. Grey fingers Taylor.'

He puffed several times.

'Is that about the case?' he said.

'Yes, sir,' Makin said. 'That's about it. That's how the Chief Inspector will see it.'

'So now knock it down for me,' Gently said.

Makin hesitated. 'Knock it down, sir?'

'Knock it down,' Gently said. 'We're short of proof. You said so yourself.'

Makin hesitated again, looked at Gently. Makin had tired, retriever-like eyes. He had a mouth that drooped and the certainty of jowls. He picked up a paperweight with ungainly fingers.

'Well, sir,' he said, chivvying the paperweight. 'Maybe a point or two did occur

to me.'

'They did to me, too,' Gently said. 'I like to know I'm not alone.'

'There are these others here,' Makin said, indicating the list. 'I know they don't live in London. But they could come here, might have friends here. One of them could be in the reckoning.'

'Good,' Gently said. 'Though perhaps unlikely.'

'Perhaps unlikely,' Makin said. 'But possible, sir. Then there's Taylor, he doesn't fit in. He had his own motive, and it was his knife. I know you're going to say, sir, that if Taylor did it, then Grey wouldn't know, wouldn't have gone for an alibi. But it could just be that Grey did know, and that his fingering Taylor is genuine.'

'Well,' Gently said.

Makin worked the paperweight.

'Here's another thing that puzzles me, sir,' he said. 'What we found at the flat. I can't quite figure it. What went on there after the killing. We'll say that Sadie Sunshine killed him. Does she dress fast and get to hell out of it? No. She clears out her dresses, her shoes, her knick-knacks, and does it so well that we don't find a thing. That takes a good bit of swallowing, sir. We didn't find a single woman's thing in the flat. Not an old hair-curler or a button or a dud lipstick. All she left behind was a pong.'

'That's excellent,' Gently said. 'But there could be an explanation.'

'Yes, sir,' Makin said. 'She could have cleared her stuff out in advance. Maybe breaking it off with Blackburn was part of the plan, so she had opportunity to cover her tracks. But if that's so, why did she leave the knife, which there was a chance of us tracing to her? And why did she wipe the handle of the knife but leave her dabs all over the flat?'

'Murderers do make mistakes,' Gently said. 'Straight after a killing they aren't too logical. It may be the guilt makes a block in their minds, compels them to leave a clue behind.'

'But,' Makin said, 'it didn't have to be after the killing. She could have wiped the flat over when she took her gear. And after the killing she was cool enough to wipe the knife-handle, so why wasn't she cool enough to take the knife? And there's this too.'

He pulled open a drawer, took the photographs of Sadie Sunshine from a file.

'Just forget what we know, sir, and look at these. Do they strike you as photographs of a cold-blooded killer?'

Gently shrugged. 'For what it's worth, no.'

'For what it's worth,' Makin said. 'It has to be worth something, sir. I never saw a picture of a murderer yet that didn't show two or three characteristic features. The commonest one is a prominent jaw. Ninety-nine per cent of killers have it. Then there's the deep upper lip, strongly indented, the fixed mouth, the withdrawn eyes.'

'You've been doing homework,' Gently said.

'I've made it my subject, sir,' Makin said. 'And what I'm saying is this girl doesn't have those features, in a line-up of killers you could pick her out directly. She's fine-jawed, average upper lip, has an expressive mouth, her eyes are with you. She's warm. You want to know her. The smile wasn't put on for the camera.'

'Of course, she's black,' Gently said.

'That's a lot of bosh,' Makin said impatiently. 'I've had plenty of experience with the immigrant community, sir, and what goes for white people goes for them.

They've got their ration of villains, naturally, and some of them are pretty crude and roughneck. But then you've said it. I live next door to some. If I needed a friend, I'd know where to go.'

'All right,' Gently said. 'Established, then: Sadie Sunshine doesn't look like a killer. Anything else?'

Makin spun the paperweight.

'No, sir,' he said. 'That's all I can think of.'

'You've done well,' Gently said. 'We had a case a moment ago. Now you've about knocked it flat.'

He puffed a few times.

'Perhaps,' he said, 'you can salvage me something out of the pieces.'

Makin laid down the paperweight. He looked more perky, his brown eyes less tired.

'Sir,' he said. 'I think it stands out a mile. This Sadie Sunshine isn't the killer. She was there with Blackburn, that's pretty sure, and she may have, probably did, witness the killing. But she wasn't any part of it, or setting it up, though somebody may have made use of her being there.'

'So why didn't she come to us?' Gently said.

'Maybe the killer threatened her,' Makin said.

'He could have killed her,' Gently said. 'But he didn't kill her. And she doesn't come to us. She hides.'

'That's it,' Makin said. 'That's it, sir. He didn't kill her, and she didn't inform on him. It has to be someone close, a relative. The brother. Taylor. One of them.'

'Taylor was there,' Gently said. 'And it was his knife. Sharkey could have been there, could have had the knife.'

'The brother,' Makin said, pointing to the list. 'He had the strong motive. It's there.'

Gently grinned round his pipe. 'We should tackle other cases together,' he said. 'I came back here to talk to Grey. Now you've convinced me I should talk to Sharkey.'

'Well, it's all theory, sir,' Makin said, flushing.

'Another good point,' Gently said. 'So we'll get back to facts. Who's checking Osgood's alibi?'

'I am, sir.'

'Fine,' Gently said. 'See if you can break it.'

Paradise Street, Brickfields, was busier at 4 p.m. than at 12 noon. Men with sacking over their shoulders were unloading furniture into the depository. Gently halted by them, dropped a window.

'Will you be here much longer?' he asked one of the men.

The man cast away a sodden cigarette-end, stared at Gently, at the car.

'You going to leave that here, mate?' he said.

'That's the idea.'

'We'll be here another hour.'

Gently slipped him five bob, parked the Sceptre, went on up to the Coconut Grove.

The doors were locked, but there was a bell-push. It was Sharkey who drew back the bolts and admitted him.

'I sure was expecting you, man,' he greeted him. 'I knew you'd be back, whoever

else wasn't.'

'Oh,' Gently said. 'Why was that?'

Sharkey winked. 'Just the way you behaved, man. Letting Mr Trouble ask all the questions, then you coming back to bowl the spinners. Ain't that the way now?'

Gently shrugged. 'Why is the club closed?' he asked.

'Afternoons, we just close, Sharkey said. 'There sure ain't nothing sinister 'bout that.'

He led Gently through the club to the room behind the bar. There on a kitchen table Sarah Sunshine was deftly slicing stacks of sandwiches. She gave Gently a nervous smile. On a big electric range a coffee-percolator was bubbling. The room was brightly painted, brightly lit, looked, smelled clinically clean.

'You take a seat, man,' Sharkey said. 'Don't you stand on any ceremony.'

He took cups and saucers from a painted dresser and poured three cups of coffee. He was wearing a striped apron and had his shirt-sleeves rolled above his elbows. A partly sliced sausage on a board on the table had probably been the job from which Gently's ring had summoned him.

He handed Gently his coffee and a bowl of demerara sugar. They sat. Sarah Sunshine continued slicing the stacks of sandwiches. On top of the dresser, Gently noticed, a black guitar was lying. Sharkey saw where he was looking, chuckled, rose, took down the guitar.

'You ain't come to hear music, man,' he said.

'I haven't come to drink coffee,' Gently said, drinking.

'Surest thing,' Sharkey said, dragging a string. 'You wouldn't want to hear my brandest new calypso.'

'Sharkey,' Sarah Sunshine said. 'You be sensible.'

'Oh, you woman, don't fuss,' Sharkey said. 'This here man ain't like Mr Trouble. He ain't going to bust this guitar over my head.'

'So don't you bug him with it,' Sarah Sunshine said.

'You woman, you woman,' Sharkey said. 'This gentleman's hip. This gentleman's cool. He's going to love old Sharkey's nonsense.'

He sprang a sudden liquid phrase from the guitar. It suggested a dancer jumping into an arena. Then he launched with powerful physical impact into the verse of a calypso.

That old white man come around here,
Think we all should drop dead with fear—
He bang his fist upon the table
And he shout out as loud as he is able—
Man I don't like your colour,
You had a whore for a mother—

'Just you stop it!' Sarah Sunshine exclaimed. 'That ain't no song to go singing right now.'

'Woman, I'm with it,' Sharkey laughed at her. 'You keep cutting those sandwiches, and you listen.'

He played a ringing phrase and went on singing.

That old white man got a red face,
He's the most coloured of any race—

He got hair that 'most always drops out,
Yellow teeth and a cutaway snout
He's a very funny man,
You keep a straight face if you can;
He's the lord of the universe,
He go to heaven in a Rolls-Royce
hearse—

Here he played a rippling voluntary, throwing his head back in a gust of laughter.

I don't know man what we do with him,
He such a long way out on a limb—
Maybe we dress him in silks and sateens,
Call him King of the Barbareens—

The song ended in a shout, underlined with a drum-roll and a clashing chord.

Sarah Sunshine, the sandwich-knife shaking in her hand, cowered away from her triumphant husband.

'Man, ain't that music?' Sharkey demanded of Gently. 'You going to tell me that ain't music?'

'That's music,' Gently shrugged. 'You're good. You're wasting your talent here in Brickfields.'

'I am the mostest,' Sharkey laughed. 'Not Muham-med Ali is more mostest than me. But I don't waste my talent, man. We got a very select audience at the Coconut Grove.'

'They'll appreciate that song,' Gently said.

'Oh, man, it ain't serious,' Sharkey said, putting up the guitar. 'Only when we get men like Mr Trouble come around, we surely have to find some way to laugh him off.'

'That ain't no song to go singing,' Sarah Sunshine quavered. 'You just don't care, Sharkey. You got a wild streak.'

'Sure I got a wild streak, you woman,' Sharkey said. 'Why else are you loving me all this time?'

'Well, who said I'm loving you?' Sarah Sunshine said.

'I says it, you woman,' Sharkey said with a rolling chuckle.

He picked up his coffee, drank it quickly.

'But you don't say a lot, man,' he said to Gently. 'Maybe you's weighing us up, Sarah and me. You's getting ready with the fast ones.'

'Are you expecting fast ones?' Gently asked.

'All round the wicket,' Sharkey said. 'Seamers, googlies, loose ones, fast ones. Like you's Laker and Trueman put together.'

'You're fond of cricket?' Gently said.

'I didn't miss a Test yet,' Sharkey said.

'Back in Kingston,' Gently said.

'Oh yes, you bet. Back in Kingston.'

'With your kid brother,' Gently said. 'He was fond of cricket too?'

Sharkey's eyes squeezed shut.

'Man,' he said thickly. 'You got through me with that one.'

Gently took the Immigration Department list from his wallet, unfolded it, handed

it to Sharkey. Sarah Sunshine glided behind her husband, read over his shoulder with frightened eyes. She moaned, hid her face in his shoulder. Sharkey's mouth trembled, twitched.

'Yeh man,' he said at last. 'That's mighty official.'

He handed the list back to Gently.

* * *

'Of course, you wouldn't have seen him,' Gently said, 'since you left Jamaica. How old was he then? About fifteen?'

Sharkey shook off his wife. He sat down. Sarah Sunshine slunk behind the table.

'He'd perhaps have left school,' Gently said. 'Be running wild. Down at the harbour. On the beaches. He'd be a swimmer.'

'Oh Christ,' Sharkey said. 'Don't man, don't. You worse than Mr Tallent. Why cain't you hit me?'

'Was he a swimmer?' Gently said.

Sharkey jammed his fists into his eyes.

'Was he?' Gently continued.

Sharkey groaned. 'Yeh. A good swimmer. He'd keep swimming.'

'If he had a chance,' Gently said. 'The ship going down might suck him under.'

Sharkey sobbed.

'Perhaps it would be the better way,' Gently said. 'Quicker. Better than him swimming around, not giving up.'

'Oh you devil, you devil,' Sharkey sobbed.

'Not that you cared very much, did you?' Gently said.

'You ain't safe, man,' Sharkey sobbed. 'I'll kill you.'

'Yes,' Gently said. 'But Blackburn was responsible.'

He folded the list and put it away. Sharkey was staring with sodden eyes. His hands were upturned, the fingers hooked. He was drawing breath through his mouth.

'Did you pay for Sonny's trip?' Gently said. 'Or did Blackburn give him a free passage?'

Sharkey didn't seem to hear him, went on staring, breathing roughly.

'Perhaps the guitar lessons squared it.'

'You let my man be!' Sarah Sunshine screamed.

She had the sandwich-knife in her hand, was holding it waveringly, point upwards.

'Yeh, woman, you quiet,' Sharkey said.

He closed his hands, let them drop.

'You's a devilman,' he said to Gently. 'It ain't no good with you, is it?'

Gently shrugged and drank a little coffee.

'You'd no cause to love Blackburn,' he said. 'You couldn't get rid of him because he owned you. But what he'd done to you, you couldn't forget.'

Sharkey glared at him.

'In fact, you hated Blackburn. He was bleeding you dry in any case. He'd seduced your sister. Then he drowned your brother. He was a King of the Barbareens.'

'Police man, you's fixing me,' Sharkey said.

'Why did your sister run?' Gently said. 'Not because she killed him, but because you killed him, and because she didn't want to answer questions.'

'You better take me in,' Sharkey said. 'You better put the chains on me, man. The way you tell it I'm done for, ain't no use me putting my word in.'

‘You deny hating Blackburn?’ Gently said.

Sharkey’s eyes smouldered. ‘No,’ he said. ‘You’s about right. I never loved Tommy too much to begin with, and I sure finished up hoping he’d drop deado.’

‘He owned this place?’

‘Yeh, he owned it. There ain’t no papers, nothing legal, that sort. He put up the dough, I was paying him off. But man, I’d be paying him off at doomsday. About Sadie and him, that’s another matter.’

‘Him being white.’

Sharkey shook his head. ‘I don’t hate white folks,’ he said. ‘You got that notion, you just change it. We’s a mixed-up world, all us people, and it ain’t no use to take exception. But I don’t like my sister living around with a man whose boots I have to lick.’

‘Did she know your attitude?’

‘She knew that.’

‘There were rows?’

‘Yeh. Plenty.’

‘How did she take the death of your brother?’

‘Not too damn hard man,’ Sharkey said.

He flicked at the sweat growing on his face.

‘Maybe she didn’t know Sonny too well,’ he said. ‘Back home she lived with Mother’s folk a lot, that’s Montego way across from Kingston. Me, I around brought him up after Father went off to the Caymans, some place. We had it planned. He was through A-levels. He was coming here to study economics.’

‘He a mighty fine boy,’ Sarah Sunshine snuffled. ‘That boy was clever. He going somewhere.’

‘He could play most any instrument,’ Sharkey said. ‘He could teach me things. That was Sonny.’

‘But your sister did break with Blackburn,’ Gently said.

‘Sure, she broke with him,’ Sharkey said. ‘But I don’t know, man, she’d have broken anyway, she never did stop with any man long. Come and go, that’s my sister. She got a thing in her head about a career. I guess Tommy was helping her along that way, fixing auditions, that sort. Only she didn’t make it yet.’

‘Did she have a row with him?’

‘She didn’t flip big, just looked him straight in the eye and told him.’

‘What about you?’

‘Maybe I flipped.’

‘Threatened him, perhaps?’

Sharkey looked away.

‘You got an idea about me, man,’ he said. ‘Ain’t nothing I can say is going to make any difference. Only you’s wrong, so wrong. I just ain’t a violent man.’

‘Did you threaten him?’

‘I opened my big mouth. Same way I opened it to you just now.’

‘You said you’d kill him.’

‘I said that.’

‘He’s dead.’

‘Yeh,’ Sharkey said.

He fixed his dark eyes on Gently’s.

‘I want you to get this straight,’ he said. ‘You say I hated him. Maybe so. But

there's surely more than one kind of hate. I didn't hate Tommy so I would do him some injury, so I felt about him that he wasn't human. When I said I'd kill him that was showing him my feelings. I didn't mean I'd take his life. He knew that.'

'Though he was responsible for Sonny's death,' Gently said.

'But man, I wasn't sure of it,' Sharkey said. 'Tommy swore the ship was okay, they surveyed it some place every year. He say the captain wouldn't sail her if he didn't know she is okay.'

'That captain would have sailed anything,' Gently said.

'But I was not blaming Tommy altogether,' Sharkey said.

'Oh man, he knew,' Sarah Sunshine said. 'That's all a lot of lies he was saying, you man.'

They turned to her. She stood shivering, big-eyed, still clutching the sandwich-knife tight.

'You woman, be quiet,' Sharkey said. 'You don't know Tommy was saying a lot of lies.'

'I do know that,' Sarah Sunshine said. 'Tommy knew a long time that ship is no good.'

'How you know that?'

'I just do hear things.'

'Who you hear?'

'It was Freddy,' she said.

'Freddy,' Gently said. 'You mean Frederick Grey, Mrs Sunshine?'

'That's who I mean,' Sarah Sunshine said defiantly. 'I hear him talk about that to Ozzie.'

'You heard him say Blackburn knew the ship was defective?'

'I hear him say Tommy knew a long time. I hear him say Tommy try to get more insurance, but the insurance people not going to play.'

'When did you hear that?'

'Oh, sometime I hear it. After it all came out in the papers. Freddy and Ozzie are standing at the counter. Maybe they don't know I'm listening.'

'You woman,' Sharkey said. 'Why you not tell me?'

'You man,' she said. 'I don't want you to flip again.'

Gently said, 'But did you tell anyone?'

'Maybe,' Sarah Sunshine said, 'Sadie.'

Sharkey groaned. 'That's the limit,' he said. 'Why didn't you just say you told me, you woman? The Superintendent's going to believe Sadie told me and I been lying to him just now.'

'Did Sadie tell you?' Gently asked.

'No, man. We didn't talk about that.'

'But she knew,' Gently said.

'She didn't say nothing. She done with Tommy, she didn't talk about him.'

'When did she fetch her clothes from his flat?' Gently said.

'About right away,' Sharkey said. 'The day after.'

'Would that be after you'd told her what you'd heard?' Gently asked Sarah Sunshine.

'I don't just remember that,' she said. 'Maybe.'

'Of course,' Gently said. 'Grey could have told her himself, she didn't have to

hear it second-hand. She was friends with him. No doubt she'd ask him if Blackburn were really to blame for the death of her brother.'

'Why you think that?' Sharkey said. 'She ain't no friends with Freddy Grey.'

'Surely she was?' Gently's brows lifted. 'With Grey as well as Blackburn?'

Sharkey hesitated, stared. 'No, sir, oh no, sir,' he said. 'She never had much truck with Freddy Grey. I don't know who's been telling you that.'

'Freddy go around with lots of women,' Sarah Sunshine said. 'I don't recall any particular one.'

'This one is pretty, well-dressed,' Gently said. 'She's been seen wearing a white hat trimmed with lace.'

Sarah Sunshine's hand went to her mouth.

'Oh my gosh,' she said.

She looked at Sharkey.

'Man, that ain't nothing to go by,' Sharkey said, scowling. 'That sort of hat is very popular with our womenfolk.'

'How popular?' Gently said.

'Just as popular as can be,' Sharkey scowled. 'That Eartha Kitt set the fashion with them hats. They very becoming to black ladies.'

'Have you got one?' Gently asked Sarah Sunshine.

'Me? Lordy no!' Sarah Sunshine said.

'Did Sadie have one?'

She kept her mouth covered, stared rim-eyed at Gently.

'I'm telling you, man,' Sharkey said, 'it don't signify. You see hats like that here every evening. They's the gear. So if Sadie had one, that don't pick her out in a crowd.'

'But she did have one?'

'Yeh. Maybe she did.'

'It isn't in her wardrobe now,' Gently said.

'So she took it with her,' Sharkey said. 'Why not, man?'

'Did she take it with her?' Gently asked Sarah Sunshine.

Sarah Sunshine nodded, eyes still big.

'So she had the hat, Gently said. 'And she was seen wearing it, riding in Grey's car in Regent Street. On 22 April. Her spring bonnet. She was wearing it to a meeting with Grey.'

Sarah Sunshine dropped into a chair.

'Oh you man,' Sharkey burst out. 'Cain't you ever take an answer? That woman could have been any one of a dozen Freddy Grey knocks around with, off and on. So even if it's Sadie. He maybe give her a lift. I ain't going to swear he never done that. But there ain't never been anything intimate between them, that's sure, that's certain. We knows that.'

'You both know it.'

'Yeh. Us both.'

Sharkey sent a quick look at Sarah Sunshine.

Sarah Sunshine nodded tremulously.

'That's true, sir,' she said. 'We both do know that.'

'So you forget it, man,' Sharkey said. 'You don't need to keep pulling Sadie into this affair. She finished with Tommy way before it happened, and nothing she heard since didn't alterate that.'

‘And of course, she was here all Tuesday evening?’

Sharkey dragged at his beard.

‘Ain’t that what I said, man?’

‘Taylor didn’t see her.’

‘I cain’t help Taylor.’

‘Taylor was watching for her. Watching Blackburn.’

‘She don’t feel so good, Tuesday,’ Sarah Sunshine said, her eyes fixed on the floor. ‘She stay in her room, don’t do her act. That’s why Aaron don’t see her.’

‘So there wasn’t any act?’

‘No, sir. Just the band.’

‘You didn’t fill in?’ Gently said to Sharkey.

‘Me? No man,’ Sharkey said. His eyes were puzzled. ‘I guess I was busy. This place gets hectic.’

‘Perhaps you didn’t even notice,’ Gently said. ‘Perhaps you didn’t feel so good, either. I daresay Mrs Sunshine can carry on when you and Sadie are indisposed.’

‘I was right out there, man! Ask a hundred people.’

‘But your sister wasn’t.’

‘She’s here too.’

‘If you were out there, you don’t know that,’ Gently said. ‘And if you know that you weren’t out there, I’d say both you and she were missing, her all the time, you part of it. Around half-past nine to half-past ten. No dance-act. No song.’

‘I just can prove—’

Sarah Sunshine lifted her head.

‘I can prove Sharkey is there, sir,’ she said.

She was looking at her husband. He looked at her. Her eyes were steady.

‘I can swear to it,’ she said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHEN GENTLY LEFT, Sharkey stayed in the kitchen and it was Sarah who showed the Yard man out. At the foyer she glanced back quickly, then laid her hand on Gently's arm. She looked up at him earnestly.

'You ain't angry with me, sir?'

'No,' Gently said. 'Just doubtful.'

'You don't have no cause to be doubtful, sir.'

'It's my way,' Gently said. 'I'm a policeman.'

The hand on his arm was quivering.

'That's the truth I was saying in there,' she said. 'It ain't just on account of I'm Sharkey's missus. I do really know he was here at the Club.'

Gently said nothing.

'You believe me, sir?' she asked.

'I'll need corroboration,' Gently said. 'I hear talk of a hundred people I can ask, but so far nobody's mentioned a name.'

Her almond-shaped eyes narrowed.

'We got a staff here, sir,' she said. 'There's four waitresses and the doorman. They all tell you the same as me.'

'Is that corroboration?' Gently said.

'Then there's all those people,' Sarah Sunshine said quickly. 'We give you names there, sir, addresses and names. 'Bout twenty or thirty your young man took.'

'And what can these twenty or thirty tell me?'

'They tell you Sharkey is here all evening.'

'Were they watching him?' Gently asked.

'They must have seen him around, sir. He's running the bar. They got to have seen him.'

'Let's get this straight,' Gently said. 'He runs the bar – and nobody else does.'

Her hand pulled on his arm.

'I ain't exactly saying that, sir. But he's in and out all the time, he ain't away from there for long.'

'Meanwhile,' Gently said, 'the band is playing, the lights going up and down, people dancing, singing. They aren't watching your husband, if he's in or out, or when he's out, or for how long. Is that corroboration?'

'Oh, gosh, yes, sir.'

'No,' Gently said. 'We can shoot it to pieces. And your word is suspect because you're his wife. And the staff's is suspect. Your husband doesn't have an alibi.'

A tremor passed over Sarah Sunshine's face. Her eyes held to his insistently.

'Sir, I know it's true,' she said. 'Cain't you just believe me? I's certain, I's sure he ain't mixed up with this.'

'How are you so sure?'

‘I just am, sir.’

‘Because you know he was here.’

‘Yes, sir, I do know that.’

‘Or is it because you know Sadie wasn’t here?’

‘Sadie . . .’

Her eyes jumped and the hand trembled. She looked away.

‘Sadie was in her room,’ she said. ‘I know that, too, sir. I went in there twice. She gone to bed with a headache. I go in there ’bout quarter to ten-time to take her a hot drink. She surely is there. She is reading a novel.’

‘There’s a back way out of here?’

‘Sadie never did—’

‘And perhaps a short-cut to the station,’ Gently said. ‘You’re lying, Mrs Sunshine. Sadie wasn’t in her room. Not at quarter to ten. Perhaps not at all.’

‘Oh you man, you man,’ Sarah Sunshine wailed.

‘What time did she go out?’ Gently said.

‘She never did go—’

‘She went out, and she went out to Blackburn’s flat. You know. And you know too that she was intimate with Grey.’

‘Oh man, I don’t know!’ Sarah Sunshine wailed, ducking her face in Gently’s arm.

‘Yes,’ Gently said. ‘That’s why you’re so certain. So certain your husband is in the clear.’

Her whole body was shaking against his.

‘Sadie had gone out, hadn’t she?’ Gently said.

‘Oh maybe, maybe,’ Sarah Sunshine wailed. ‘I ain’t so sure ’bout when I went in.’

‘When did you miss her?’

‘Oh, gosh, I ain’t sure—’

‘I think she was missing all the evening.’

‘I ain’t certain, sir—’

‘You can guess.’

She gave a little moan, said, ‘All d’ evening.’

‘And when did she come back?’

Sarah Sunshine swayed away from him, though still keeping her grip on his arm. Her rimmed eyes looked at him.

‘Honest I don’t know, sir. Honest and truly. She there next morning.’

‘But she told you where she’d been.’

‘Oh no, sir. She didn’t tell me, I didn’t ask.’

‘You knew.’

‘No, sir.’

‘You guessed.’

She nodded reluctantly.

‘So?’ Gently said.

Her eyes sank.

‘I think she been with a man, sir. Not Mr Tommy. She through with him. It ain’t with Freddy either, sir, because Freddy never cared ’bout her at all.’

‘Oh yes, I think so,’ Gently said.

‘No, sir,’ Sarah Sunshine said. ‘Never at all. She ain’t his type, he don’t go for

her, and she don't never go for him. That is the truth, sir, cut my throat. You sure is wrong about them two.'

'Perhaps,' Gently said. 'So who was she with?'

She kept her head down, fingers digging.

'I don't aim to make trouble for folks, sir,' she said. 'Only you so goshawful certain my man killed Tommy.'

'Well,' Gently said.

She dug some more.

'You talked to Mr Jimmy, sir?' she said.

'Who's he?'

'That's the one we call Ozzie.'

'Osgood?' Gently said.

'Yes, sir.'

Gently stared at her silently.

Sarah Sunshine said, 'Sadie surely liked Jimmy. She been out with that man since she broke with Tommy. Two, three times she been out for certain. I think she out with him again on Tuesday.'

'Sadie – with him?' Gently said.

'Yes, sir.' She nodded.

'Not a very likely pair,' Gently said.

'Him not an educated person, sir,' Sarah Sunshine said. 'But he got pleasant ways along with the ladies. Sadie think he's nice.'

'You surprise me,' Gently said. 'But thanks for the guess. I'll keep him in mind.'

Her fingers still held.

'That ain't all, sir,' she said. She glanced again at the bar. 'There's something else about Ozzie. You know about Tommy and Freddy's wife?'

'I didn't know it was common knowledge,' Gently said.

'You cain't hide that sort of thing, sir,' she said. 'Maybe you know Freddy went home and found them.'

'So,' Gently said.

'Ozzie warned Freddy, sir. That's the truth. Tommy told Sadie. And Tommy's most awful angry with Ozzie so's he talks of firing him out of the business. That's mostly what I come out to tell you, sir. I think Ozzie's the most suspicionest man of the lot.'

She relaxed her hold.

'Does Sharkey know this?' Gently asked.

She shook her head. 'We don't tell Sharkey, sir. He friendly with Ozzie, don't want to know he tell tales. That's why I didn't say nothing in there.'

She gave a little shudder, drawing back from Gently. The door behind the bar snicked open. Sharkey stood there. Sarah Sunshine hastened to unbolt the outer double doors. Gently shrugged, went through, stood a moment.

'Where's Sadie?' he said.

Sarah Sunshine's eyes sprang open. She was trembling again.

'I surely don't know . . .'

They could hear Sharkey coming across the hall. Gently gave another shrug, went down the steps into the rain.

The blue Viva flashed its turn and hissed into the M/T yard ahead of Gently. Makin,

wearing a dripping pork-pie hat and a sodden raincoat, climbed out and paddled back to the Sceptre.

'My God, sir, we do cop the weather,' he said, hunching.

'Any luck?' Gently asked.

'Could be, sir,' Makin said.

'Let's get inside,' Gently said.

Tallent was back. He was sitting in the office with his stockinged feet propped up to a radiator. On other radiators draped raincoats were issuing lazy miasmas of steam. Stout sat near the desk, rockering his chair, a shorthand notebook open in his hand. The warm, damp air was heady with tobacco-smoke, seemed to congeal around the neon strip.

'Come in,' Tallent said. 'Find a radiator. We all fell in the river too.'

Makin hastily stripped off his raincoat. Gently unbuttoned, found a chair.

'We talked to twenty-seven immigrants,' said Tallent. 'We drove fifty miles and walked ten. What they call routine or something. I think maybe I killed Blackburn.'

'You've done well,' Gently said.

'Yeah,' Tallent said. 'I thought I'd better do well. But for all the traipsing around, sir, we haven't turned up much. It about checks with what we had.'

'Nothing fresh on Tuesday night?'

'Nobody saw Sadie,' Tallent said. 'Sharkey they saw, Sarah Sunshine, Amorous Aaron. Not Sadie.'

'Was Sharkey absent at all?' Gently asked.

Tallent wriggled his toes, said, 'Yes and no. Some say he was there all the time, some aren't so sure. You can't nail him.'

'What did you get on Blackburn?'

'Plenty,' Tallent said. 'He was a big feature round there. They still don't quite figure he was a villain, maybe had bad luck, more like that. They really seemed to have liked that louse. He took their dough but he gave value. I have to admit I was surprised.'

'That's how I felt, sir,' Stout said. 'I honestly think they're going to miss Blackburn. He was a sort of bridge between them and us, and now they feel they're on their own.'

'What about him and Sharkey?' Gently asked.

'We've got a few things on that,' Tallent said. 'Seems there was a regular bust-up in Sharkey's back room, though everybody's playing it down. The day after the sinking, that was. Blackburn didn't show for a few nights. Sharkey, Sadie were both cutting him. Only Sharkey's missus would say hallo.'

'Sadie cut him?'

'They say. She wasn't in the club much after the row.'

'Nobody noticed her making up with him?'

'Nope,' Tallent said, waggling a toe.

'Anything on her and the other partners?' Gently asked.

Tallent peered at him. 'I didn't know to ask that,' he said. 'You want me to backtrack through twenty-seven interviews, or is this just something by the way?'

'Grey, I'm most interested in,' Gently said.

'Grey,' Tallent said. 'The alibi man.'

'I think it's a good alibi,' Gently said, 'as far as it goes, but it goes too far. Grey shouldn't have known he'd need one.'

‘Yeah,’ Tallent said. ‘Anything about Grey.’

‘He had a black woman-friend,’ Gently said. ‘I’ve just talked to the Sunshines. I’m pretty sure it was Sadie. I think they know, were trying to steer me off it.’

‘Wow!’ Tallent said. ‘This may be worth back-tracking.’

‘Nobody mentioned it to you?’

Tallent shook his head.

‘We’ve got something about Osgood though, sir,’ Stout said. ‘There’s a statement here that links him with Sadie.’

He flicked through his notebook, found a place, began reading:

‘ “No, sir, I never see her speak to him afterwards, no, sir, she acted like she didn’t see him, yes, sir, Mr Ozzie, I see her sitting with him.” ’

‘Well, well,’ Tallent said. ‘Ozzie too. And him another alibi man on Tuesday.’

‘Sir,’ Makin said. ‘This ties in with my information. I’ve just heard Osgood had a black woman in his flat.’

‘On Tuesday?’ Gently asked quickly.

‘No, sir, not Tuesday,’ Makin said. ‘Or if he did, nobody spotted it. But a couple of other times in the last few days. There’s an old lady next-door who keeps an eye on him.’

‘Could she describe the woman?’

‘Youngish, sir. Pretty. Taller than average. A smart dresser.’

‘Sadie,’ Tallent said. ‘That darned tart.’

‘It certainly sounded like her, sir,’ Makin said.

Gently stared a moment at Tallent’s neat desk-top.

‘Go on,’ he said to Makin. ‘What about Osgood’s alibi?’

‘I’d say it was pretty dicy, sir,’ Makin said, taking out his notebook. ‘I have two times here, but neither covers him. First, he went up to his flat soon after six. Mrs Jenner, that’s the neighbour, saw him come in. She was watching TV with her light off, so she could see him park and go into the building. She’d just seen the news, which gives us the time. A little later she switched off, could hear a TV still going. These are flats in a terrace house, Beaumont Street, Acton, and there’s only a partition-wall between her and Osgood. Osgood’s TV was going till ten to nine when Mrs Jenner switched on for the news. She switched off afterwards. Osgood had switched off. She didn’t hear any more from his flat.’

‘Jesus, some alibi,’ Tallent said. ‘That leaves Ozzie right in the middle.’

‘Did you ask around,’ Gently said. ‘Anyone see him leave, notice his car gone?’

Makin shook his head. ‘I covered plenty of ground, sir. I worked the pubs round about. They knew Osgood, but they hadn’t seen him. Mrs Jenner was the only neighbour who had anything.’

Tallent fetched his toes down from the telephone-directory and flipped a cigarette into his mouth.

‘All the time this case gets more interesting,’ he said. ‘We could have a full-time conspiracy going on here. Sadie plays with Blackburn, cheats with Grey, fills in odd nights with Osgood. Grey’s her fancy, has the alibi. Ozzie’s her tool. He’s expendable.’

‘We’re not sure about her and Osgood, sir,’ Stout ventured.

Tallent drove smoke at him.

‘I think so,’ he said. ‘She’s been seen with him, you got it down there, then she’s seen at his flat, with a good description.’

‘When was she seen at his flat?’ Gently asked Makin.

‘Twice,’ Makin said, ‘in the last few days.’

‘Not earlier?’

‘No, sir,’ Makin said.

‘When was she seen at the club with Osgood?’ Gently asked Stout.

Stout said, ‘Last week, sir. After the row.’

‘That’s the point,’ Gently said. ‘After the row. After Sadie had broken with Blackburn.’

He gave a short résumé of his interview with the Sunshines and of Sarah Sunshine’s allegations.

Tallent rasped in a great lungful of smoke.

‘Ozzie,’ he said. ‘Would you credit it?’

‘I’m not sure I would,’ Gently said. ‘He seems to have had the least motive.’

‘You don’t need much motive,’ Tallent said. ‘Like losing your job is a good motive. Like being vampo’d by a beautiful black girl is a good motive. And who knows if Grey didn’t throw in a bonus?’

‘But is Osgood violent?’

‘Oh, come on,’ Tallent said. ‘Push anyone hard and they turn violent. I wouldn’t have put money on Ozzie either, but he’s in the middle now with Sadie.’

Gently shrugged. ‘We’ll talk to him,’ he said.

‘Yeah,’ Tallent said. ‘He’s kind of earned it.’

‘Perhaps I’ll talk to him,’ Gently said.

Tallent nodded. ‘Sir,’ he said.

Osgood entered with a sulky expression on his thick-featured face. He squinted warily at Tallent before taking the chair placed for him. Gently was sitting behind the desk. Osgood looked quickly at him then dropped his eyes. His hairy hands, like two primitive animals, shifted and burrowed on his fleshy knees.

‘We’ve one or two questions for you, Osgood,’ Gently said. ‘They concern Blackburn’s death.’

‘Why ask me, then?’ Osgood said. ‘I keep telling you, I don’t know nothing.’

‘Still, we’d like to ask them,’ Gently said. ‘It may just happen you can help us. You’ll know a few things about Blackburn’s affairs. About him and Sadie Sunshine, for instance.’

Osgood hesitated. ‘What about them?’

‘Anything you can think of,’ Gently said. ‘We can’t ask her. She’s cleared out. So maybe you can fill in some details.’

Osgood’s hands moved. ‘She’s cleared out?’

‘Soon after the killing,’ Gently said.

‘You – talked to Sharkey?’

‘Of course,’ Gently said. ‘But he doesn’t know where she’s gone.’

Osgood looked at his hands for a while.

‘She’s all right,’ he said. ‘Sadie. You don’t want to go looking for her. She don’t know nothing. Not Sadie.’

‘What makes you so certain?’ Gently said.

‘She’s all right,’ Osgood said. ‘You was asking.’

‘Blackburn had a woman with him when he was killed,’ Gently said.

‘Not Sadie,’ Osgood said. ‘That’s what I say.’

Gently shrugged, took out his pipe, very slowly began to fill it.

'She'd broken with Blackburn, of course,' he said. 'You'd know all about that. She lost a brother on the *Naxos Island.* She'd perhaps feel very strongly Blackburn was to blame. She had a knife. It was Aaron Taylor's knife. That knife we found in the body. She left her dabs all over the flat. Nobody knows where she was on Tuesday. But you think she's innocent?'

Osgood swallowed twice.

'Yeah, yeah,' he said. 'Yeah, she's innocent.'

'You perhaps know her very well,' Gently said.

'Yeah,' Osgood said. 'Yeah, perhaps I do.'

'In fact, she got around quite a bit,' Gently said. 'She wasn't only Blackburn's mistress, was she?'

'I don't know about that,' Osgood said. 'She stuck to Tommy. She's all right.'

'But there was Grey, too,' Gently said, striking a match.

'Grey,' Osgood said. 'She never went with Freddy.'

'Oh yes,' Gently said. 'Grey too. I've just spoken to his wife. She's seen them together. That's why Mrs Grey took up with Blackburn.'

'Yeah,' Osgood gaped. 'But listen—'

'You'll remember about Mrs Grey and Blackburn,' Gently said. 'It was you who told Grey what was going on. That's why Blackburn was threatening to sack you.'

He put the match to his pipe, puffed.

Osgood was staring, his mouth open.

'Listen,' he gulped. 'That ain't nothing to do with it. Tommy never meant that. I could have grassed on him.'

'Not without grassing on yourself,' Gently said.

'Yeah, I could've grassed on him,' Osgood said. 'I told him that. I told him I'd grass on him. And he come round. He wasn't going to sack me.'

Gently smoked.

'It's bleeding true,' Osgood said.

'We've checked your alibi for Tuesday,' Gently said.

'I was home Tuesday.'

'We've checked it out. We can't place you there all evening.'

'Listen,' Osgood said. 'I was there. You can't prove I wasn't there. I come home. I stayed home. I never shifted all evening.'

'But,' Gently said. 'Why were you there?'

'Why?' Osgood gaped.

Gently nodded. 'Why weren't you at the Coconut Grove, for example, or Grey either? On Tuesday?'

Osgood's mouth opened and closed.

'I don't know nothing about Grey,' he said.

'Oh, you'd know something about him,' Gently said. 'You and he sharing the same girl-friend.'

'That ain't true!'

'The same girl-friend,' Gently said. 'Grey and Sadie, Sadie and you.'

'She never had nothing to do with Freddy!'

'But she did with you.'

'She didn't. She didn't!'

'She did,' Gently said. 'She's been seen with you, Osgood. At the club. At your

flat. After she'd broken with Blackburn. Sarah Sunshine says she's been out with you. She broke with Blackburn, switched to you. I wonder why?'

'It's lies!' Osgood gabbled. 'All bleeding lies. You can't prove none of it.'

'I can prove all of it,' Gently said. 'I have one, two, three witnesses. She switched to you – not to Grey, who she was running around with before – but you. And Blackburn dies. And Grey comes up with a rot-proof alibi. So where does that leave you, Osgood?'

'I ain't saying any more! I didn't kill him!'

'Prove where you were Tuesday evening.'

Osgood's blue eyes rolled.

'You can't,' Gently said. 'After 9 p.m. you can't be placed at your flat. Sadie Sunshine was missing all evening. Blackburn died about 10 p.m. She set him up. He was too much of a handful for his killer to tackle man-to-man, so he had to be made defenceless. Then the killer came. Right on cue.'

'Gawd, but I was home!' Osgood croaked.

'No,' Gently said. 'You weren't at home.'

'I was, I was,' Osgood croaked. 'I can prove it, bloody prove it.'

'So why not prove it?'

'I bloody will!'

But he hung on, panting, eyes swelling at Gently. All his heavy face was dragging, working, creasing with indecision.

'So?' Gently said.

'I don't have to prove it!'

Gently shrugged, reached for his matches.

'Listen!' Osgood said. 'You bloody got to listen – it's all lies about me and Sadie! So she went with Freddy – I don't know – Freddy's laid a few black girls – but not with me. That's lies! She ain't never been with me.'

'Three witnesses lying?'

'Yeah – lying!'

'And you don't want to prove where you were on Tuesday?'

'I don't have to—'

Osgood broke off, his face sagging in bafflement.

'I want a lawyer,' he said. 'I ain't saying any more.'

'Perhaps you've said too much already,' Gently said.

'I didn't kill him! I want a lawyer.'

'Yes,' Gently said. 'You want a lawyer.'

They took Osgood out. Gently ordered Grey to be brought in. Tallent watched thoughtfully as Osgood went, then snatched himself a cigarette.

'There's a lying bastard,' he said. 'And a stupid bastard on top.'

'Perhaps not so stupid,' Gently said. 'He had an idea where to stop.'

'Yeah,' Tallent said. 'You had him somehow. He damn nearly came across. Then like he was figuring he would make matters worse, so he started blocking and bawling for a lawyer.'

'That's very perceptive,' Gently said.

Tallent grinned, said, 'I have moments. But still I don't like that bastard much. I'd go to evens he's not our chummie. What about you, sir?'

Gently shrugged.

‘I can’t see Osgood using a knife, sir,’ Stout said.

‘Sonny boy,’ Tallent said.

‘But I can’t, sir,’ Stout said. ‘He looks more like a strangler.’

‘Sonny,’ Tallent said. ‘You take a strangler. Give him reason. Put a knife in his hand. What does he do?’

‘Well, I don’t know, sir,’ Stout said. ‘It was just an impression.’

Grey walked in jauntily. He glanced around at the steaming raincoats, Tallent’s unshod feet.

‘Don’t tell me,’ he said. ‘It’s raining out there. Or maybe you just got back from a sewer.’

‘Sit,’ Tallent said. ‘You’re losing, boy. Trouble’s nudging in on you fast.’

‘I keep throwing fits,’ Grey said, sitting. ‘I think maybe I left a tap running at home.’

‘Sure you did,’ Tallent said. ‘She wears skirts.’

‘In here, never a dull one,’ Grey said.

He smiled at Gently.

‘Grey,’ Gently said. ‘I seem to recall you have a good memory.’

‘It works on cigarettes,’ Grey said. ‘And incidentally, I prefer Player’s.’

Tallent tossed him a cigarette. Grey lit it. He blew smoke towards the ceiling.

‘I’m remembering,’ he said. ‘Let me help you.’

‘I want you to remember April the twenty-second,’ Gently said.

Grey puffed a while. He kept looking at Gently.

‘Why the twenty-second?’ he said.

‘It’s a date I have,’ Gently said. ‘What were you doing on that date?’

Grey puffed some more.

‘It’s so sudden,’ he said. ‘Perhaps you could give me the day of the week.’

‘Certainly,’ Gently said. ‘It was a Saturday. The office would be closed. Where were you?’

Grey kept puffing.

‘No good,’ he said. ‘I just don’t seem to recall that Saturday. If it had been Easter, now, something like that. Maybe I took the wife racing.’

Gently shook his head.

‘No?’ Grey said. ‘Could be we were up shopping.’

‘Could be she was,’ Gently said.

‘Could it?’ Grey said.

He held in smoke.

‘It’s coming to me,’ he said.

‘Good,’ Gently said.

‘I like to help,’ Grey said. ‘I remember a Saturday, maybe that Saturday, when I went up town to buy shirts.’

‘Without your wife.’

‘Seems so,’ Grey said. ‘Maybe she took a fit, came later. But I went up alone, ate lunch there, came back without seeing her.’

‘Came back alone?’

Grey puffed twice.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Being honest. I met a broad from the Coconut Grove and gave her a lift back to Brickfields.’

‘Keep being honest,’ Gently said.

Grey shrugged. ‘So I nearly lied about it,’ he said. ‘Why not? It can’t be anything to you. Maybe I laid her. What then?’

Gently said nothing.

‘Now you’ll want to know her name,’ Grey said. ‘That’s what this is leading up to. You’ve maybe got an idea that a broad killed Tommy, maybe a broad I was going round with. That it?’

Gently kept silent.

‘Yes, that’s it,’ Grey said. ‘You’ve talked to my wife, that’s pretty obvious, and she’s filled you in with a few theories. But she’s a liar, of course. You know that? You’d better double-check anything she says. Another thing: she can’t tell one black person from another. Identification by her means nothing.’

‘But you agree you were out with a black woman that day?’

Grey puffed quickly.

‘Didn’t I say so?’

‘So if your wife said that she told the truth?’

‘Maybe. Only she wouldn’t know which girl I was with.’

‘She knows one black woman,’ Gently said.

‘She does?’

Grey’s eyes were suddenly sharp. Then he laughed.

‘I was forgetting. She met Sadie. Tommy had her with him a couple of times. Did she say it was Sadie?’

Gently watched him.

‘That’s hardly likely, is it?’ Grey said. ‘Sadie was Tommy’s girl, she didn’t play around. He paid too many bills for her to cheat on him. Does Eileen say that?’

Gently’s face was blank.

‘So she does,’ Grey said. ‘Bless her. I’ll bet she only saw that girl’s bonnet, and she swore blind it was Sadie. And you tumbling over yourself to believe that, because Eileen had already told you about Tommy and me. So’s now I’m lined up for conspiracy with Sadie. Big deal. Bouquet for Eileen.’

He stabbed out the cigarette.

‘Try Ozzie,’ he said. ‘Ozzie went out with her.’

‘But you had the alibi,’ Gently said.

‘That’s right,’ Grey said. ‘Why am I grieving? None of this crap will stand up in court. Even Eileen couldn’t louse up my alibi. So have it your way. Say it was Sadie. Give yourself a ball with that.’

‘Was it Sadie?’

‘Why not?’

‘She was your girl-friend as well as Blackburn’s?’

‘Anything,’ Grey said. ‘You want to think so. There’s no harm in it. Keep thinking.’

‘And she killed Blackburn?’

‘Sure,’ Grey said.

‘And warned you when?’

‘She warned me when. And then I went out and got an alibi, and that’s the hard part. I’m fire-proof.’

‘Not if this goes into a statement,’ Gently said.

Grey laughed. ‘There isn’t going to be a statement,’ he said. ‘I’m just playing along. This is your suggestion. But you can’t prove anything except the alibi.’

‘Suppose I could,’ Gently said.

Grey’s eyes were sharp again for a moment.

‘Suppose you were heard offering incitement,’ Gently said. ‘And add to that a planned alibi.’

Grey hesitated, said, ‘Have you talked to Sadie?’

Gently watched, said nothing.

Grey took some breaths.

‘So be clever,’ he said. ‘I don’t scare like Ozzie does. I know where I stand. So does my lawyer. Out of this one I walk away.’

‘That must comfort you,’ Gently said.

‘It does,’ Grey said. ‘Do I go?’

‘Wait,’ Gently said. ‘I’ve a message from your wife. She asked me to tell you that she knows.’

‘Great,’ Grey said. ‘She knows what?’

‘You can go,’ Gently said.

Grey paused, looking at Gently, then got to his feet and was marched out.

‘And for me, that’s it,’ Tallent said, when the door closed behind Grey. ‘He was backhanding it, the louse, but he was giving it just the way it happened. He triggered that killing.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Makin said. ‘That was my impression too. He knew you were on to him, but he didn’t know how far, so he kept spelling it out to see how you’d take it.’

‘He triggered it,’ Tallent said. ‘Through Sadie he did it. Who her partner was doesn’t matter. It could have been Sharkey or Taylor or Osgood, or Sadie by herself. But Grey triggered it!’

‘Not Sadie by herself, sir,’ Stout said.

‘For once,’ Tallent said, ‘I go with you, sonny.’

Makin pointed to a copy of the Immigration Department’s lists that lay in Tallent’s in-tray.

‘I make Sharkey the favourite, sir,’ he said. ‘Since that turned up I can’t see it otherwise.’

Gently hunched over his pipe, let smoke rise in small rings.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Now we need Sadie. Most of the rest of it is explained.’

‘She perhaps won’t talk,’ Tallent said.

Gently smiled. ‘She doesn’t have to talk. Whether she opens her mouth or keeps it closed she is going to condemn the killer for us.’

‘Yeah?’ Tallent said. ‘How’s that?’

Gently puffed, said, ‘We’re pretty sure of the killer. How Sadie reacts, it doesn’t matter how, must fill the blank in the equation. We need her next. We’ll upgrade our signal. If she’s alive we have to have her.’

Tallent stroked his knuckles.

‘If she’s alive?’

‘That’s always an open question,’ Gently shrugged. ‘From the murderer’s point of view she’s better dead, and there’s been a big silence about her up till now.’

‘Yeah,’ Tallent said. ‘Big silence.’

‘For the rest, we need to tie up some details,’ Gently said. ‘I’d like Stout to finish checking out Grey’s alibi, and you and Makin to backtrack on your questioning this afternoon. With reference to Sadie, Grey and Osgood, and anything you can pick up

on Grey's movements yesterday.'

'Hell,' Tallent said. 'You don't think he killed Sadie?'

'Then we'll need the other bereaved relatives on the Immigration Department list checked,' Gently said. 'If they have friends or connections this way, if they were away from home on Tuesday. When that's done' – he grinned at Tallent – 'you can knock off and get yourself a night's rest.'

'Oh thanks,' Tallent said. 'I did wonder about that, like if it figured in the routine where you come from.'

Gently blew rings.

'I'm spending the evening out,' he said. 'Music, dance, bright lights. I want to hear Sharkey sing his calypso. Study night-life out of town.'

Tallent stared.

'You going there alone, sir?'

'Blackburn did,' Gently said. 'Grey, Osgood.'

'Yeah, but Blackburn's in the morgue, sir,' Tallent said.

'Coincidence,' Gently said.

Tallent said nothing.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AT 8 P.M. IT still rained, a cold sweat out of the darkness. Street-light reflections aimed daggers along the narrow Brickfields streets. Mostly the streets were deserted, but here and there loped a black figure, long-limbed, padded-shouldered, dripping trilby slanted forward.

Paradise Street wore a new aspect. At the top end the club's sign burned red and blue. The street surface receded glimmering towards it between lines of lightless parked cars. The cars were mostly old and decrepit and jazzed with paint and stick-on labels. Several were bumperless and without grilles and only a few retained their hub-caps.

Gently drove through the lines and parked bumpers-on to Sharkey's red Consul. He waited. A big-shouldered black man came out of the vestibule and down the steps. He came to a stand, eye-whites showing, taking in Gently, the car. Gently dropping his window. The man ambled up to him. He pushed his face close to the window.

'Man,' he said. 'You just knows you cain't park any place round here.'

'Oh yes, I think so,' Gently said. 'I'll leave it unlocked with the keys in it.'

The man gaped.

'You do that,' he said, 'and they'll be selling her in Glasgow some place tomorrow. Who you man – what you want? This only for black people round here.'

Gently got out, raised the window, closed the door, held out the keys.

'Here,' he said. 'You take them. That way we'll know the car is safe.'

The man jerked his hand away.

'No, sir!' he said. 'You just get back in that car and drive away.'

'Take them,' Gently said. 'Sharkey would like that.'

He shoved the keys at him, walked on.

The beat of steel drums came through the vestibule and swelled as Gently pushed open the inner doors. The lighting was dim except on the stage where coloured spotlights were weaving patterns. Near the stage some couples were dancing. Perhaps a hundred immigrants sat around the tables. There was laughing and a racket of conversation; then suddenly a lull; then a hush.

Gently kept walking towards the bar. The dancing broke up and the drums stopped. In the silence of the warm air one could hear the spotlight motor buzzing in the rafters. Gently's step sounded softly. Behind the bar Sharkey was standing. Behind Sharkey stood his wife. They didn't move. Nobody moved.

Gently reached the bar. He sat on a stool. Sharkey's eyes never left him. Over Sharkey's shoulder his wife stared, her pretty face tight with terror. Sharkey's hands were gripped tight, his face shiny and scowling. Behind Gently were stealthy movements. Gently leaned on the counter, didn't turn his head.

'I'd like some coffee,' he said.

Sharkey moved his hand, didn't let his eyes shift from Gently's. Sarah Sunshine gave a little whimper, slunk to the coffee-machine, made a clatter with a cup and saucer. Back at the vestibule the doors parted and the bouncer came in, stood hesitant. There were other movements. One of the musicians accidentally touched his drum.

Sharkey said, 'You come for me, man?'

Gently shook his head. 'Not yet,' he said.

'But you going to come?'

'Perhaps,' Gently said. 'Or perhaps you'll come to me. When you're ready.'

He took the coffee from Sarah Sunshine. She'd spilt part of it in the saucer. He spooned in demerara and stirred it. Behind him he heard whispering.

'So why you here, man?' Sharkey said.

Gently drank coffee, smiled at Sharkey.

'You told me to come around for the music,' he said. 'Maybe I'd like to hear your calypso again.'

'You know I ain't going to sing that calypso.'

'Why not?' Gently shrugged. 'You have your audience.'

'That ain't the kind of calypso I sing in public.' Gently drank again, went on smiling.

Sharkey moved a little towards the counter. He put his hands on it, leaned towards Gently.

'How many you got out there, man?' he said. ' 'Cause you going to need just about the whole force.'

'I don't have anyone,' Gently said.

'You ain't here alone,' Sharkey said. 'That's certain.'

'Quite alone,' Gently said. 'Did I need a bodyguard?'

'Man, quit kidding,' Sharkey said. 'This is serious.'

His dripping face came closer to Gently's.

'You just better slide out of here, man,' he said. 'If you want me, I come along later. Just don't let us have no massacres.'

'You'd do that, would you?' Gently said.

'Yeh, man,' Sharkey said. 'If that's how it's to be. These people won't let you march me out of here, not unless you got tanks all round.'

'Nice to know they're loyal,' Gently said. 'But I'm not taking you.'

'Oh man, I'm telling you,' Sharkey said.

'And I'm telling you,' Gently said. 'When are we going to have some music?'

Sharkey drew back across the counter, face dragging, staring aslant. He threw a look at the cowering Sarah. She felt his eyes and moaned. The whispering behind Gently had become a buzz, and Sharkey's eyes darted past him. Then suddenly he snatched a drinks-tray from the counter and struck it a blow with his fist.

'You peoples out there!'

The buzzing faltered. Sharkey hit the tray again.

'Listen to me, you bunch of no-goods. Ain't you seen a white man here before?'

He went through the counter-flap, stood hefting the tray.

'This man is a friend of mine,' he said. 'Yeh, that's what I'm saying, he's a friend, so just let me catch you treating him different. He come around here to hear the music, that's why this man come around, and you going to make me ashamed in front of him? You going to behave like a set of hoodlums?'

He waved the tray.

'You, Moses, get playing! I don't recall hearing myself tell you to stop. And you, Josh, get back on the door. And the rest of you sit down, start minding your own business.'

There was a shuffling and creaking, a roll from the drums. Sharkey stood ground a moment, the tray lofted. Then he strutted back into the bar.

Gently was drinking his coffee. He hadn't turned round.

The band played. There were eight musicians. They were dressed in open-necked white satin shirts and black jeans. One of them was a singer who sang in a language or languages that Gently didn't understand. They played continuously. Band numbers were connected by solos on drums, xylophone, trumpet and guitar. One member played a chromatic harmonica with an eery virtuousity.

Four waitresses in scarlet overalls carried trays of food and drinks to the tables. Sharkey and Sarah Sunshine served at the bar, both occasionally retiring to the kitchen.

Nobody now appeared to pay much attention to Gently. At the tables they were noisy and laughter was continual. They were mostly youngsters. Some of the girls were very pretty. Corduroy jackets were popular wear with the men.

Near the stage was an open space used by the dancers, who joined in or dropped out as the mood took them. In spite of the noise there was an air of decorousness, a gay politeness. It had a family feeling.

Sharkey ignored Gently. He served customers on each side of him with an intent, silent energy. His expression daunted the customers, who seemed ready to chat, but then took their orders and went quietly away. One felt that normally he was central to the scene but now was deliberately effacing himself. Tonight the bar was a sideshow, existed at the periphery of the noise, the music.

Sarah Sunshine couldn't ignore Gently. She was on a perpetual tremble. Her big dark eyes were helplessly drawn to him at every interval of serving.

Gently himself might as well not have been there for all the attention he was paying anyone. A heavy figure in a grey raincoat, he sat smoking and leaning over his cup.

His eyes looked sleepy. After a casual look round he'd lapsed into dreamy appreciation of the music.

When at last he stirred it was to give an order. He beckoned to the wide-eyed Sarah Sunshine.

'What's that salad dish you're serving?'

'That's – that's the fried chicken with banana salad, sir.'

Sarah Sunshine stood quivering, mesmerized. Sharkey had gone still, was watching the pair of them.

'I'll try some of that.'

'Oh yes, yes, sir. If you sit down at a table, sir, I bring it to you.'

'What do you drink with it?'

' 'Most anything, sir.'

'Fix me a lime drink with a dash of rum.'

Sarah scuttled, almost ran into the kitchen, and Sharkey reached for a tall glass.

'You ain't a member, man,' he said, not looking at Gently. 'How you think you going to get rum?'

‘Put me down as a friend,’ Gently said. ‘I’ll pay a surcharge on the salad.’

‘A friend,’ Sharkey said. ‘A friend. When you’s a friend, man, I’ll eat my guitar.’

Gently got his drink. He picked it up and slid lazily off his stool. A number of eyes turned towards the bar unitedly sought a fresh direction. Gently looked over the tables. Except one next the juke-box all the tables were filled. At the one next the juke-box sat a single customer. He was Aaron Taylor. Gently carried his drink there.

‘All right if I share with you?’

Aaron Taylor ducked his head but didn’t say anything.

Gently pushed back a chair and sat so he could see both bar and stage. Eyes from the other tables were switching back to him, but switched away again as quickly. From across the bar Sharkey was staring. Aaron Taylor stared at nothing.

Gently drank.

‘You still waiting for Sadie to turn up?’ he asked.

Aaron Taylor jerked his head slightly, his thick lips in a twist.

‘You know she ain’t going to turn up, sir,’ he said.

‘One day, perhaps,’ Gently said.

Aaron Taylor drooped his head. On the table by him stood an empty glass. He sat slouched, his long legs splayed.

‘Maybe,’ he said. ‘But that don’t matter.’

‘I think it matters,’ Gently said.

‘No, sir, no, sir,’ Aaron Taylor said. ‘It’s like Mr Tallent says. She don’t look at me.’

‘Perhaps she will,’ Gently said.

‘No, sir, no,’ Aaron Taylor said. ‘She got altogether too much class. I’m just a poor man, ain’t got nothing.’

He picked up the empty glass, set it down again with an irritable bang. Gently sipped. The band was playing a rumba. Aaron Taylor wasn’t noticing the music.

‘Where do you think she is?’ Gently said.

Aaron Taylor scrubbed with the glass.

‘I tell you something, sir,’ he said. ‘You better run me in for killing that white man.’

‘Is this a confession?’ Gently said.

‘You just run me in,’ Aaron Taylor said. ‘You don’t have to worry ’bout these folk here, they won’t raise a finger to save this fellow.’

‘But did you do it?’ Gently said.

Aaron Taylor swirled the glass.

‘I was there, sir,’ he said. ‘That was surely my knife. Maybe I did go inside that flat, maybe I stuck that knife in Tommy.’

His eyes met Gently’s. Gently said nothing.

‘It don’t matter about me,’ Aaron Taylor said. ‘I go to jail for a whole lot of years and that don’t signify. I ain’t nothing.’

‘Only we can’t play it that way,’ Gently said.

‘That’s the best, best way,’ Aaron Taylor said. ‘You take my word, sir. You just take it.’

Gently shook his head.

Aaron Taylor was silent.

* * *

The rumba finished, left the drums filling in.

Sarah Sunshine came out with a tray.

She crossed from the bar with a nervous, flitting step, got around somehow behind Gently, tumbled cutlery on the table before him.

Aaron Taylor kept his eyes from her, still shunted the empty glass.

She set down a green plate loaded with hot fried chicken, chopped banana, pineapple, rice and watercress; then a curved green side-dish containing mango chutney, olives and small white pickled onions. She stood aside.

'How much?' Gently said.

'That sure is on the house, sir,' Sarah Sunshine said.

'Oh no,' Gently said. 'How much?'

'Oh gosh, sir, that's ten and six,' Sarah Sunshine said. Gently pulled out a pound.

'And the drink?' he said.

'We cain't charge for no drink,' Sarah Sunshine said.

'And the coffee and the tip,' Gently said. 'And another drink for Mr Taylor.'

He shoved the note in her shaking hand.

'Where did Sadie go?' he asked.

Above the soft drumming he could hear her teeth nicking and the tray she was holding had begun to flutter.

'All right,' Gently said. 'Never mind. Fetch Mr Taylor his drink.'

'Oh, sir, I just don't know,' Sarah Sunshine quavered. 'I really don't know where that girl go to.'

'So fetch the drink,' Gently said.

'If I know that, sir, I tell you.'

'Your husband is getting restive,' Gently said. 'Do as I say. Fetch the drink.'

He began to eat. Sarah Sunshine hesitated, then flitted back to the bar. Sharkey had watched every move. He snapped something at Sarah as she went into the bar.

'She never going to tell you,' Aaron Taylor said to his glass. 'You keep asking, but she ain't going to tell you.'

'She knows,' Gently said.

'Yeh, sir, she knows.'

'And Sharkey too.'

Aaron Taylor said nothing.

Sarah Sunshine came back with a glass of rum, set it slopping on the table before Taylor. Taylor quietly moved the glass a few inches, didn't look up at Sarah Sunshine.

'Sir,' Sarah Sunshine stammered. 'You got the wrong idea, sir. You don't need Sadie. That woman is innocent.'

'So where is she?' Gently said.

'She just gone away, sir. But you don't need her. She ain't the right one.'

'I still need to talk to her,' Gently said.

'Oh gosh, no,' Sarah Sunshine said. 'You forget about her, sir.'

Gently went on eating his chicken.

Sarah Sunshine grabbed Taylor's empty glass and scurried away.

The steel drums throbbed. Gently helped himself to chutney.

'Perhaps Sadie isn't anywhere,' he said through a mouthful.

'How you mean, sir?' Aaron Taylor said.

'She knows too much,' Gently said. 'And we haven't found her.'

Aaron Taylor's eyes went to him, jumping large.

‘Could even be Blackburn’s death was cover,’ Gently said. ‘Somebody wanting to put Sadie away, killing Blackburn first to put us on a wrong scent.’

He paused to drink.

‘It’s odd,’ he said, ‘we don’t find Sadie.’

Aaron Taylor’s eyes were staring, his breath coming quick. He crammed his glass to his mouth with clumsy fingers, gulped about half of it, set the glass down hard.

‘Nobody wouldn’t do that thing,’ he said.

‘Oh yes,’ Gently said. ‘I can think of a couple of prospects.’

‘That’s too wicked – they wouldn’t do it!’

Gently shrugged, loaded his fork, ate.

‘No, sir,’ Aaron Taylor said. ‘Sadie ain’t dead. Nobody going to make me believe she dead. That’s a bad, bad business, but it ain’t like you say. Sadie’s all right. She turn up again one day.’

‘Then where is she now?’ Gently said.

‘You find her, you find her,’ Aaron Taylor said.

‘Not without help, it seems,’ Gently said. ‘We’ve got a big hunt on, but we haven’t found Sadie.’

He paused over a mouthful, watching Taylor. Taylor’s broad-boned face was dragging. His thick lips hung apart, his pupils had gone small and sightless. He spoke again without focusing his eyes.

‘Take me in, sir,’ he said quickly. ‘That’s the bestest.’

‘You,’ Gently said. ‘You’re in the clear, Taylor.’

‘Oh lordy, don’t push it,’ Aaron Taylor said. ‘You cain’t understand, sir. Just take me.’

Gently finished the chicken salad. The air in the hall was growing too warm. Following the fashion around him, he stripped off raincoat and jacket and hung them over the back of his chair. Somebody cheered and there was laughter. Sharkey glared over the bar and the laughter died. Then he turned to argue with Sarah Sunshine, who, after a moment, slunk out of the bar.

Aaron Taylor sipped a little rum and slid a look towards Gently.

‘Is this your usual table?’ Gently asked.

Aaron Taylor nodded, sipped.

‘On Tuesday night?’

Aaron Taylor nodded.

‘And you didn’t see Sadie?’

Aaron Taylor shook his head.

‘But you do see the bar,’ Gently said. ‘And you’d be watching it. Watching for Sadie. You’d see Sharkey and Sarah Sunshine. All the time till you left.’

‘Yeh, sir,’ Aaron Taylor said.

‘You did see them?’

Aaron Taylor nodded.

‘All the time?’

Aaron Taylor’s head drooped.

‘ ’Most all the time, sir. They’re both of them there.’

‘Till you left,’ Gently said.

Aaron Taylor nodded and hunched low over his rum.

Over in the bar, Sharkey, alone, stood leaning with his back to Gently, drinking.

Suddenly the coloured spots above them cut and a single white spot beamed down on the stage.

Aaron Taylor straightened up with a gasp, but slowly sank again into his hunch.

'Sadie's spot,' Gently said.

Aaron Taylor groaned, hugged his glass.

The band rippled into slow calypso time and a slim figure crept into the spot. Taylor jerked round again, staring. But the woman in the spot was Sarah Sunshine. She picked up the microphone reluctantly, giving the cable a weak pluck, then she swayed a little with the music, and her soft, quavering voice began to come.

Oh coconut grove—
You sigh where the trade-winds play,
Coconut grove—
You calling to me all day;
I'm so far from you,
Don't know what I'll do—
This old smokey town
Won't let me settle down—
Man I long to be
By that sunny sea—
Near my coconut grove.

Her voice broke slightly on the last line and she pulled the microphone close to her. The steel drums and xylophone took up the air again and played it through with variations. Then she came back with a verse.

Long time ago I was a little girl
Watching those breakers roll by—
Now I ain't no more that little girl,
I hear the sea and I want to cry.

Over this her voice broke several times.

'Oh lord, oh lord,' Aaron Taylor groaned.

'This'll be Sadie's song, too,' Gently said.

'But why she singing it?' Aaron Taylor said. 'Why she going up there and singing it?'

The tables were quiet. The dancers were standing back in the shadows.

Sarah Sunshine sang the chorus again. The band extemporized. She sang a second verse.

Once I was dreaming of silver and gold,
Dressed me in clothes that were fine—
You take the silver, you take the gold,
Leave me the seashells, they's all that's mine.

Now she could barely control her voice, and tears were glinting on her cheeks. In the final chorus she choked down some of the words and couldn't manage the last line. Applause was emotional. Most of the customers were on their feet and the dancers pushed up to the stage, cheering and clapping. Sarah Sunshine covered her

face. Even the band was forgetting to fill in. Only Sharkey had eyes for Gently, only Aaron Taylor had eyes for nobody. The applause went on for over a minute, when Sarah Sunshine ran off and the drums swung into a solo.

Now quite a few eyes were turned towards Gently, accompanied by a buzzing surge of conversation.

Aaron Taylor scrubbed tears from his eyes, took a deep sob of breath, sipped his rum.

Gently drank too.

In a little while he saw Sarah Sunshine reappear in the bar. Sharkey spoke to her. She shook her head wordlessly, went quietly to the counter to take an order.

'Quite a demonstration,' Gently said to Aaron Taylor.

'Oh man,' Aaron Taylor said. 'She hurt.'

'Just because she was singing Sadie's song?' Gently said.

Aaron Taylor's brown eyes stared fixedly at him for a moment.

The drums played 'Peanut Vendor', then the rest of the band came in with a cha-cha. Sarah Sunshine moved about the tables, bringing orders, fetching glasses. Gently signalled to her when she passed near them. She obeyed the signal, came slowly to their table.

'I enjoyed your song,' Gently said. 'It was very effective.'

'That really is Sadie's song, sir,' Sarah Sunshine said quickly. 'I make the words, Sharkey make the music. But that really is Sadie's song.'

'But you sang it with great feeling,' Gently said.

About them he could hear the conversation slacken.

'I guess it says things we all feel about, sir,' Sarah Sunshine said. 'We all get the blues sometimes, want to catch the next boat home.'

'But you seemed very moved tonight,' Gently said. 'And your audience too. Unusually moved.'

'Maybe that's because I try to sing it for them, sir,' Sarah Sunshine said. 'They know I ain't any sort of singer. They just like it 'cause I try.'

She reached a shaking hand for Gently's plate.

'It sounded more personal,' Gently said.

'Oh no, no, sir,' Sarah Sunshine said. 'That ain't nothing personal. You don't take it that way.'

'Perhaps you're homesick yourself,' Gently said. 'You must miss the sunshine, your own family.'

'No, sir, no, sir,' Sarah Sunshine said. 'I's happy. I's quite happy.'

'You don't want to go home?'

Sarah Sunshine's mouth crumpled.

'She ain't got no home, sir,' Aaron Taylor said. 'She ain't got no people, they're all gone. She ain't got nobody but Sharkey.'

'I see. I'm sorry,' Gently said.

'She got nobody at all,' Aaron Taylor said.

Sarah Sunshine held her head away from Gently as though staring at something to her side.

'Please, you don't treat her rough, sir,' Aaron Taylor said.

Sharkey came striding over from the bar. Sarah Sunshine grabbed Gently's side-dish and glass. Her face was working. She ran.

At 10 the band had a break and clustered round the bar for drinks. They took the chance to look Gently over but they didn't make any jokes about him. He wasn't noticing them. He sat smoking his pipe. Aaron Taylor still sat opposite him. Aaron Taylor had an inch of rum. Gently hadn't drunk again. Aaron Taylor sat with elbows on the table, forehead in his hands, shoulders big.

Six or seven minutes later the musicians strolled back to the stage and began a fresh, slow number. Nobody danced. There were big clusters round the tables, though the two next to Gently had been quietly vacated.

'How many breaks do the band get?' Gently asked Aaron Taylor.

Aaron Taylor slowly lifted his head.

'Just this one, sir,' he said.

Sharkey, rinsing glasses, caught Taylor's movement and turned to stare.

'Where did Blackburn sit?'

'That table near the bar, sir. He 'most always used that table.'

'Did he on Tuesday?'

Aaron Taylor hesitated.

'I ain't ab'slutely sure, sir.'

'He didn't,' Gently said.

Aaron Taylor lifted his glass and gulped.

'He'd sit over this way,' Gently said. 'Perhaps not far from you. Am I right? At a guess I'd say that table by the wall, the last one, farthest from the others.'

Aaron Taylor kept the glass near his face.

'That's where he ate, watched the band,' Gently said. 'Where he maybe expected to hear Sadie sing, only Sadie didn't show. There was only the band singer.'

Aaron Taylor moaned.

'Not much more to fill in, is there?' Gently said. 'And Sadie could fill it in for us. If we had her. Had her alive.'

'Sir, don't you say that . . .!'

Gently shrugged and took short puffs at his pipe.

'Oh, you find her,' Aaron Taylor moaned. 'You find her, sir. You just must.'

'So where do I look?'

'I cain't say, sir . . .'

Gently gave Taylor a hard look. Taylor's knuckles whitened over the rum-glass. He screwed his eyes shut. He said nothing.

The band changed its tempo, brought in a trumpet.

Gently stood up, walked over to the bar. Both the Sunshines were behind the bar. Both went still, watched him coming. Sharkey came forward a step to the counter. Sarah Sunshine edged behind him. Sharkey's face was hard-lined, his eyes glaring, over-large.

He breathed hard through his nostrils.

'So when you make your move, man?' he said.

Gently looked from him to Sarah Sunshine. Sarah Sunshine snatched her face aside.

'When we find Sadie,' Gently said.

'Suppose you don't find her?' Sharkey said.

'Oh, we'll find her,' Gently said. 'Even under fresh-turned earth, we'll find her.'

Sharkey sucked in breath.

'You don't want her,' he said. 'You just torturing us here, man. Sadie ain't dead.'

‘Aaron thinks she may be,’ Gently said. ‘And Grey is certain he can’t be implicated.’

‘You never mind about that man Grey!’

‘I mind about everyone,’ Gently said, ‘in this case.’

Sharkey hung on, glaring, rough-breathed, his hands gripping the edge of the counter.

‘I’ll go now,’ Gently said. ‘Before the riot. I think perhaps your wife’s song was not very wise.’

‘Yeh man, you go, you devilman,’ Sharkey said. ‘You done enough trouble. You just go.’

Gently turned for the door. He paused briefly. In spite of the band there was a silence in the hall. In knots at the tables the customers were staring at him, shadowy in the soft lights, eye-whites gleaming. He walked slowly towards the vestibule. The silence filled in behind him. A foot shod in patent-leather was thrust into his path. He walked carefully round it. He reached the vestibule.

Outside, the massive figure of the bouncer stood black and poised at the foot of the steps. Gently went down to him. He held out his hand. The bouncer hesitated, then passed the keys.

Gently got in his car, started it, backed it.

From the vestibule came a cry and the sound of a scuffle.

A man came through the swing-doors fast, half-stumbling, half-falling down the steps. It was Aaron Taylor. Gently pushed open his nearside door. Taylor stumbled in. Gently drove away.

‘You hurt?’ he said.

Taylor’s cheek was bleeding and his lip was split and puffing up.

‘No, sir,’ he panted. ‘I don’t hurt easy. Just someone catched me with a bottle.’

‘You know who?’

Taylor wiped at the blood.

‘They don’t like me talking to you, sir,’ he jerked.

Gently grunted, kept driving slowly through the empty streets, the rain.

Taylor pulled out a handkerchief and patted his cheek, making dark blotches on the white fabric. He sat low in his seat, knees hooking high, eyes staring forward through the screen.

‘You drop me some place, sir,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ Gently said. ‘Where?’

‘Just near the canal, sir. If you’s going that way.’

Gently drove under the railway, reached the canal.

He parked. Aaron Taylor didn’t get out.

‘I don’t know where Sadie is, sir,’ he said.

‘So I keep hearing,’ Gently said.

‘But I sure know where I’d start looking,’ Aaron Taylor said.

He moulded the handkerchief against his cheek.

‘You just look Manchester way,’ he said.

‘Manchester,’ Gently said.

Aaron Taylor nodded.

‘That’s where they have friends, sir. Manchester way. Sadie stayed in Manchester when she first come over. You going to look, you look there.’

‘Thanks,’ Gently said. ‘Where in Manchester?’

‘I don’t know no more than that, sir,’ Aaron Taylor said.
He got out of the car, closed the door, padded away in the rain.

CHAPTER NINE

NOTHING CAME IN from Manchester overnight.

Before breakfast, Gently rang Divisional HQ. Tallent had left no message for him, so Gently ate lei-suredly and read his papers.

Through the window he could see Elphinstone Road beginning to dry off in patches. The sky over Finchley was yellowish and drained-looking, but the radio forecast had been doubtful.

Across in the Gardens, plane trees shed leaves of the same tints as the leaves in Calonne Road.

At half-past nine he set out, taking the North Circular Road to Twyford. He found Tallent waiting for him in the office, along with Makin and Stout.

Tallent looked Gently over quizzically.

'No knife-wounds,' he said.

'They don't take with me,' Gently said. 'Someone coshed Aaron Taylor with a bottle.'

Tallent blew a raspberry.

'Kids' stuff,' he said. 'But maybe it knocked sense into his thick skull. He give you the Manchester bit?'

Gently nodded.

'So it's just paid off,' Tallent said.

He flipped a message-form across the desk. The message originated with Salford Constabulary. It said that Sadie Virginia Sunshine had been located at 252 Ponsford St., Salford. She was lodging there with a family named Quintos. She had arrived in Salford late Wednesday evening. She was being detained at Salford HQ pending instructions from requester.

'You rang them?' Gently said.

'Pronto,' Tallent said. 'She's on her way. This is the breakthrough. One hour with her and we can get back to chivvying motorists.'

'Does the name Quintos mean anything to you?'

'It ought to,' Tallent said. 'It keeps trying to ring a bell.'

Gently picked up the Immigration Department list from Tallent's tray and laid it on the desk facing Tallent.

Tallent stared at it. Then he whistled softly.

'My God,' he said. 'They took a knock.'

'Nothing else from Salford?' Gently said.

'Nope,' Tallent said.

He grabbed the phone.

After a while he talked with someone, scribbled notes, slapped the phone down.

'There's an Albert Quintos,' he said. 'He drives an articulated truck. He was away from home Tuesday, Wednesday.'

‘Do they know where?’

‘He says Bristol. Claims to have checked in there around 6 p.m.’

‘Bristol is rather distant.’

‘Yeah,’ Tallent said. ‘But he could have been lying about when he checked in. And there’s quick trains. Give or take a little and Albert could be our chummie.’

‘It fits in,’ Makin said. ‘If he’s a friend of the Sunshines’.’

‘Another boy-friend of Sadie’s,’ Tallent said. ‘Who knows?’

He took up the phone again and rang Bristol. He gave Bristol the address he’d scribbled on the pad. When he was through he hooked a cigarette from a pack, lit it, took several long drags.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘It doesn’t feel right. This one is too much out of the blue. All along I’ve got the feeling this job is, you know, domestic.’

‘What did you get last night?’ Gently said.

‘Nix,’ Tallent said. ‘And wet feet. If Grey was carrying on with Sadie he covered his tracks really well.’

‘Anything at all?’

‘Two black whores,’ Tallent said. ‘Deborah Jones and Hannah Miffin. Grey knocked around with both of those, but not as late as 22 April. Seems he was playing the field a bit, I hear some other names mentioned. But all bangers. He didn’t have a steady. Then after a time he quit the game.’

‘Perhaps when he did get a steady,’ Makin said.

‘Yeah,’ Tallent said. ‘That would be the idea. Sometime last winter was about when, say after the parties, before Easter.’

‘Till now, six months,’ Makin said.

‘About six months,’ Tallent said. ‘Under wraps. Longer, and we might be getting whiffs of it. For six months he could be lucky.’

‘So coming to Osgood,’ Gently said.

‘Osgood,’ Tallent said, ‘wasn’t covering. This last ten days he’s been buddies with Sadie. Plenty of witnesses have seen them together.’

‘But only during these last ten days?’

‘Pretty much that,’ Tallent said.

‘You get the idea they were always friendly,’ Makin said. ‘But since the sinking it got more particular.’

‘Me,’ Tallent said, ‘I’m cold on Osgood. That stupid jerk doesn’t have it in him. If you did get him steamed up enough to kill Blackburn he’d have bungled the job, brought the ceiling down. The chummie who knifed Blackburn was an expert. He knew where the point should go in. It was all very slick, very professional, everything Osgood never was.’

‘He might have been lucky, sir,’ Stout suggested.

‘Yes, but since,’ Tallent said. ‘The way he’s behaved. And we had the lab boys go over his wardrobe. He isn’t bright enough. He must have bungled.’

‘Well, Grey’s out,’ Stout said. ‘I’m afraid that’s certain, sir. Everything he gave us about Tuesday checks.’

‘He never was in it,’ Tallent said. ‘With him, it’s the other way. He’s too bright to be around at a killing. That leaves us the Sunshines, Taylor, and now Albert Quintos.’

Tallent drew smoke, let it fan out elegantly.

‘So how about Taylor, sir?’ he said to Gently. ‘You seem to have had a session

with him. How does he rate?'

Gently shrugged.

'About third favourite,' he said.

'We don't cross him off?'

'No.' Gently shook his head. 'He had motive, opportunity, perhaps the weapon. We can't cross him off. Put him down third favourite.'

'So, third favourite,' Tallent said. 'We're getting the card straight. Now we've got Quintos and the two Sunshines. Quintos is a dark horse, we don't know about Quintos. But that list says he had motive and he may have had opportunity. Would you say second favourite?'

'It's your card,' Gently said.

'Right,' Tallent said. 'I'm running him second. That gives us the Sunshines as odds-on, which I reckon is a fair mark-up.'

He hooked out another cigarette and lit it from the butt of the first.

'Sharkey,' he said. 'Our front-runner. Perhaps you have a stable-report on him, sir.'

Gently took one of Tallent's cigarettes, lit it.

'Nervous,' he said. 'He'll maybe break.'

'Well, well,' Tallent said. 'Is that so?'

'With a little more pressure,' Gently said.

Tallent leaned back and smoked a few puffs.

'Yeah, that's how it has to be,' he said. 'When you trot them round the paddock Sharkey always shows up best. A domestic job. Sadie and Sharkey. Motive, opportunity and weapon. All the way round they fit the pattern. All the way. No gaps.'

'I'd leave Sadie out,' Makin said.

'Let's be sentimental,' Tallent said. 'Leave her out. But in or out she's part of the pattern. Blackburn died while he was laying her.'

'But she did run to the Quintoses,' Stout put in. 'There could be something significant in that.'

'Down, boy,' Tallent said. 'Don't bug me with significance. She ran to sympathetic friends.'

He squinted over his cigarette at Gently.

'How about that little more pressure?' he said. 'Like getting a search-warrant for the Coconut Grove, raiding Sharkey's wardrobe, things like that?'

Gently shook his head.

'Not necessary,' he said.

'Yeah, but if we break him,' Tallent said. 'We're short on evidence.'

'He's breaking,' Gently said. 'Now we have Sadie we've only to play out the game. We've got a whole scene going. All we do is pick up the stakes.'

He reached for the phone, rang the switchboard. 'Get me Sunshine, Paradise Road, Brickfields,' he said.

Nobody spoke while the call was coming.

Tallent jigged gouts of smoke at the ceiling.

Sharkey came on.

'Chief Superintendent Gently,' Gently said. 'We've found your sister, Sunshine. She was staying in Salford. I thought perhaps you'd like to know.'

At the other end was silence.

‘Can you hear me?’ Gently said.

‘Yeh,’ Sharkey’s voice came huskily. ‘I can hear what you’re saying.’

‘She was staying with friends,’ Gently said. ‘Name of Quintos. You know the Quintoses?’

Again silence.

‘Do you know them?’ Gently said. ‘The man’s name is Albert Quintos.’

‘Yeh, I know them,’ Sharkey said.

‘You’ll have seen Albert Quintos recently,’ Gently said.

‘No, man,’ Sharkey said. ‘I ain’t seen him. Long time since I seen Al Quintos.’

‘You surprise me,’ Gently said. ‘Well, that’s the message. We’ll have your sister back here today.’

He hung up.

‘Any bites?’ Tallent said.

‘The Quintos angle,’ Gently said. ‘He didn’t like it.’

‘To hell with Quintos,’ Tallent said. ‘Quintos is too far out on a wing. So what are we doing?’

‘We’re waiting,’ Gently said. ‘Waiting for Sadie. Like some others before us.’

Bristol came back at 12.30 p.m. with a report on Albert Quintos. Quintos had checked his articulated truck into a lorry park at 5.35 p.m. on Tuesday. He’d booked into a transport café at 5.50 p.m. but he hadn’t spent the night there. Bristol were checking further, but it wasn’t unusual for drivers to spend the night on the town. Wednesday morning Quintos had reported to the docks to be unloaded and reloaded. He was checked out at 2 p.m., his destination Salford.

By train, Quintos could have reached Paddington at a little after 9.30 p.m.

‘So it’s on,’ Tallent admitted. ‘Just. If somebody whisked him across from Paddington. You want more action?’

Gently shook his head.

‘We’ll leave it with Bristol for the moment.’

He took Tallent to lunch with him.

At 2.40 p.m. a white Police Jaguar arrived at Divisional HQ.

At 2.45 p.m. Sadie Sunshine was sitting on a chair in Tallent’s office.

‘You’ve had a meal, Miss Sunshine?’ Gently said.

Miss Sunshine sat knowledgeably, her handsome legs crossed. She was tall. She had a moulded figure. She was wearing a tailored lilac suit with a discreet blouse. She had expensively set and curled brown hair that softly nested her wide-boned face. She had a dimple. She had a slightly snubbed nose. She had a mouth with a natural smile.

‘Oh sure,’ she said, in a warm contralto. ‘Those two policemen were very good to me. I don’t have any complaints at all. I sure understand why you want to see me.’

‘That’s nice, Miss Sunshine,’ Tallent said. ‘We were getting the idea you were trying to avoid us.’

Miss Sunshine smiled at Tallent. ‘Oh well,’ she said. ‘I guess I’m impulsive now and then.’

Tallent sat down.

At a table near the desk Stout sat with a notebook, but not with his eyes on it.

Makin was absent. Instead, a greying-haired policewoman occupied a seat beside the door.

The policewoman, whose eyes were also grey, stared out of the window with fixed attention.

'So you can understand why we'd want to see you,' Gently said. 'Would you like to enlarge on that, Miss Sunshine?'

Miss Sunshine transferred her smile to Gently.

'Why, yes,' she said. 'That's surely natural. I was Tommy's girl-friend a long time. We only broke it up a fortnight ago. So when something like this happens to Tommy, I'm about the first person you'll think of. Isn't that so?'

'That's so,' Gently said.

'Well, then,' Miss Sunshine said. 'Me being impulsive, I thought I'd go to visit some friends, perhaps wait for the dust to settle a little.'

'You didn't think you should see us straight away?'

'I felt it could postpone,' Miss Sunshine said.

'Because by then suspicion might be resting elsewhere?'

Miss Sunshine smiled, moved her elegant shoulders.

'You seem an intelligent person,' Gently said. 'People like you usually have good memories.'

'You just flatter me,' Miss Sunshine said. 'I don't lay claim to anything special.'

'Let's start with a date,' Gently said. '22 April.'

Miss Sunshine thought.

'Is that something?' she said.

'I'm asking you,' Gently said. '22 April.'

Miss Sunshine thought further.

'It's just Sharkey's birthday,' she said.

'Just Sharkey's birthday?'

'That's all,' she said.

'But it's a day he'd remember, isn't it?' Gently said.

'Sure he'd remember it.'

'And his wife,' Gently said.

'She'd remember.'

'And you,' Gently said.

Miss Sunshine smoothed her taut skirt.

'So,' Gently said, 'perhaps you'll remember it for us. What you were doing 22 April. Where you went. Who with. What you wore. Who might have seen you.'

'Oh gosh, that's too much,' Miss Sunshine said.

'It shouldn't over-tax your memory,' Gently said. 'Other dates in April perhaps, but not the 22nd. Not your brother's birthday.'

Miss Sunshine examined her white-gloved hands, stretched them delicately, arranged them on her thighs.

'I guess I went up town,' she said. 'Saturdays I usually go up town.'

'To do what?'

'I'm thinking,' she said. 'Maybe I met somebody there who'll remember.'

Gently said nothing.

'You aren't helping,' she said.

Gently shrugged, picked up his pipe.

'Yes, I went up to buy Sharkey a present,' she said. 'I'm remembering now. I must have worn my spring outfit.'

She hesitated.

‘It was a pink two-piece, she said. ‘A fitted jacket with a mini-skirt.’

She looked questioningly at Gently.

‘Go on,’ Gently said.

‘Oh, and a bonnet,’ she said. ‘A white bonnet.’

‘A lace bonnet?’

‘Mostly lace.’

‘A white lace bonnet.’

Miss Sunshine nodded.

‘Do I get points for that?’ she said.

‘You’re doing very well,’ Gently said. ‘Perhaps at this stage your memory is beginning to come back with a rush.’

‘That’s truly psychic,’ Miss Sunshine said. ‘One or two other things are popping up. For instance, if only the bonnet was noticed I was maybe seen riding in a car. But that wouldn’t be surprising, would it, with me going around with Tommy Blackburn?’

‘Were you with Blackburn that day?’ Gently said.

‘No, you’re right,’ Miss Sunshine said. ‘I wasn’t. Tommy was out of town on a trip. Don’t let me tell you anything wrong.’

‘So,’ Gently said.

‘I’m thinking,’ she said. ‘Yes, somebody gave me a lift that day. I think it was Freddy. Yes, Freddy. I had a lift with Freddy Grey.’

‘A lift,’ Gently said.

‘Would that be criminal?’

Gently shrugged. ‘Ask Mrs Grey.’

‘Mrs Grey?’

Her eyes searched Gently’s. Gently met them without expression.

‘I met Mrs Grey a couple of times,’ she said. ‘I sure felt sorry for that woman. She didn’t have one hope in hell of holding Freddy. She’d think about everything.’

‘Perhaps she had cause,’ Gently said.

‘Oh, sure she had cause,’ Miss Sunshine said. ‘But she was the first cause herself. She acted like Freddy was her enemy.’

‘You think she’d exaggerate about his affairs.’

‘She’d exaggerate all right.’

‘Yet he had them.’

She moved her shoulders.

‘One,’ Gently said. ‘Especially one.’

Miss Sunshine sighed, closed her eyes a moment.

‘Me,’ she said. ‘Let’s stop the fencing. I guess Freddy and I were kidding each other when we thought it wouldn’t come out. He was scared of Tommy. So was I. Tommy would have banged me if he’d known. So we kept it very, very quiet, maybe two or three meetings a month.’

‘Of which 22 April was one.’

‘Yes, 22 April.’

‘You were going where?’

She hesitated briefly.

‘A flat . . . Freddy had the use of one in Hampstead.’

‘Thank you, Miss Sunshine,’ Gently said. ‘I scarcely expected you would be so frank. Now we’ll get more up to date. Where were you on Tuesday evening?’

Miss Sunshine reached a sharkskin bag from the floor.

'Okay with you if I smoke?' she smiled.

She peeled off the white gloves carefully then fetched out a cigarette with a gilt tip. The cigarette was scented. Miss Sunshine puffed several times without inhaling. Then she flicked it with her long thumb, said:

'Tuesday evening I was home sick.'

'Home sick,' Gently said.

'Sure,' she said. 'I had a tummy upset. Something I ate. It turned me up. I spent the evening in bed.'

'Reading,' Gently said.

'Yes, reading,' she said. 'I dare say Sarah told you about it. She gave me a look now and then. You must have asked her about me.'

'I asked her,' Gently said. 'She was nervous.'

'Oh, she'd be nervous,' Miss Sunshine said. 'She's highly strung, that woman is, she gets on the shake for the least thing. Policemen would frighten her.'

'She was frightened,' Gently said.

'Sure, she'd be frightened,' Miss Sunshine said. 'You just ignore it.'

Gently said nothing.

'That woman is a case,' Miss Sunshine said.

She drew two quick puffs.

'Where I wasn't,' she said, 'was with Tommy.'

'Blackburn was in Chiswick,' Gently said.

'So I wasn't there.'

'After he'd been in Brickfields,' Gently said.

'I didn't see him in Brickfields,' Miss Sunshine said. 'I didn't see him any time on Tuesday. We were finished. I didn't want to see him. I hadn't set eyes on him for a week.'

'Brickfields to Chiswick,' Gently said. 'The road runs through Acton.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Miss Sunshine said.

Gently shrugged, fingered his pipe.

'Look, I wasn't with Tommy,' Miss Sunshine said. 'Where else I was doesn't matter. I could be half a dozen places, it doesn't signify a bit. You say I was, you have to prove it, but I wasn't, and you can't. You just take my word I was home sick, that'll be best all round.'

'Suddenly, we're not so frank,' Gently said.

'I wasn't with Tommy,' Miss Sunshine said.

'Your fingerprints are in his flat,' Gently said.

Miss Sunshine flicked her cigarette, said nothing.

'Blackburn had a woman with him,' Gently said. 'Your prints and scent are in the flat. We think the woman had an accomplice. Aaron Taylor was watching the flat.'

'Aaron Taylor!'

'He was outside. He saw Blackburn go in.'

'How do you know that?'

'He admits it.'

Miss Sunshine's cigarette fluttered.

'How long was he watching?'

Gently polished his pipe.

'Taylor's only one suspect,' he said. 'He was there, had opportunity. But that

applies to some other people.'

'How long—?' Miss Sunshine said. She stopped.

'Your brother, for one,' Gently said. 'He had good reason for hating Blackburn, and his alibi is doubtful. He has a car. He could have driven over. He was missing at times during the evening.'

'Aaron didn't kill Tommy,' Miss Sunshine said.

'Grey couldn't have killed him,' Gently said. 'Grey knew what was coming. He fixed up an alibi. Grey had warning from the murderer.'

Miss Sunshine said nothing.

'Then there's Osgood,' Gently said. 'Perhaps his alibi is most suggestive. In fact, he doesn't really have an alibi. He was just home. Not even sick.'

'Ozzie,' Miss Sunshine said. 'Why should he kill Tommy?'

'He had his reasons,' Gently said. 'Or perhaps he was given reasons.'

'You don't know Ozzie,' Miss Sunshine said.

'I may end up understanding him,' Gently said.

Miss Sunshine drew smoke.

'Coming back to Aaron,' Gently said. 'He's the one man who was certainly there. He was checking on you. He thought you'd be there. He didn't know you were home sick.'

'That man is a crazy man,' Miss Sunshine said. 'I don't want to hear about him.'

'He loves you,' Gently said. 'He thought you'd made it up with Blackburn. He could have killed Blackburn if that were true.'

'But that wasn't true,' Miss Sunshine said.

'There are the prints, the scent,' Gently said. 'Suppose for a moment he did see you go in there, up to the flat. Then later, Blackburn.'

'He didn't see that!'

'He was there.'

'If he says he saw me it's a lie.'

'For the moment, let's follow him up the stairs.'

Miss Sunshine closed her eyes and moaned.

'He enters the flat,' Gently said. 'He can smell your scent in the dark. He can hear you moving in the bedroom. There's a faint light from the kitchen windows. As he nears the bedroom your scent grows stronger. He sees the glimmer of Blackburn's naked back. He stabs. The knife goes home. He knows from the feel of the blow he's done it. Then he panics. Perhaps you're screaming. He forgets to take his knife.

Miss Sunshine shuddered.

'So that's it,' she said. 'The knife. It has to be Aaron because of the knife.'

'It's a factor,' Gently said.

He blew through his pipe.

'How did you know about the knife?' he said.

* * *

Miss Sunshine's hazel eyes caught with his. For a space she couldn't get them free.

Then she pulled away with a breathless little chuckle and reached forward to stub her cigarette.

'Sarah rang me last night,' she said. 'I guess that's how I know about the knife.'

'Sarah rang you,' Gently said. 'I see. So Sarah knew where to ring.'

'Oh yes, she knew,' Miss Sunshine said. 'I thought I'd best keep in touch with someone.'

‘When did she ring you, Miss Sunshine?’

‘I didn’t precisely check,’ Miss Sunshine said.

Gently blew through his pipe again.

‘So you knew about the knife,’ he said. ‘No doubt you’ve given it a little thought. How that particular knife finished up in Blackburn.’

‘I didn’t stick it there,’ Miss Sunshine said.

‘But you did have possession of it,’ Gently said.

‘Not on Tuesday I didn’t,’ Miss Sunshine said. ‘Nor for a good long while before that.’

‘So who did have it?’

She shook her head.

‘I was meaning to give it back to Aaron,’ she said. ‘But somehow I didn’t get round to that, me having to hold that boy at arm’s length.’

‘Then where was the knife?’

‘It laid around,’ she said. ‘I guess I left it around in my room.’

‘Your bedroom?’

‘Yes.’

‘And it vanished from there?’

Miss Sunshine wrinkled her smooth brow.

‘Wait,’ she said. ‘I guess it went into the bar. Yes, that’s the last place I remember seeing it. Sharkey borrowed it to open a package, then it was left on a shelf in the bar.’

‘Where, of course, a hundred people might have taken it.’

She moved her shoulders.

‘Guess that’s so.’

‘Whereas only you three had access to the bedroom.’

Miss Sunshine slowly stroked her thigh.

‘I wonder what else Sarah told you,’ Gently said. ‘That call must have run up quite a bill.’

‘She told me you scared her,’ Miss Sunshine said. ‘She told me you could make her say anything you wanted.’

‘She didn’t tell me about you and Grey,’ Gently said. ‘Nobody told me anything about that.’

‘Because she didn’t know,’ Miss Sunshine said.

‘Oh, I think she would know,’ Gently said. ‘Don’t you?’

Miss Sunshine jerked her head.

‘She knew about other men,’ Gently said. ‘After Tommy. After the row. You weren’t usually secretive about these matters. I think Sarah would know about Grey.’

‘Grey was different,’ Miss Sunshine said.

‘That’s what I’m beginning to feel,’ Gently said.

‘We just had to keep it quiet,’ Miss Sunshine said.

‘Yes, but so quiet,’ Gently said.

Miss Sunshine said nothing.

‘Do you love him?’ Gently said.

Miss Sunshine picked a thread in her skirt.

‘Did you love Tommy?’

‘Tommy was fun.’

‘But Grey was more fun?’

She worried the thread.

'So if you loved Grey,' Gently said. 'Why did you bother carrying on with Tommy? That's what I find so mysterious. You dropped Tommy soon enough when it suited.'

'Oh you man,' Miss Sunshine groaned.

'Unless Grey wanted it that way,' Gently said.

Miss Sunshine stared at him, her chin low, her mouth drawn in small.

'Perhaps there's another way it makes sense,' Gently said. 'But let's work with what we've got. You have this secret liaison with Grey, who has several reasons to want Blackburn dead. When Blackburn does die, Grey has an alibi. Somebody warned him when it would happen. Somebody wanted to keep him in the clear. Who would that somebody be?'

'Not me,' Miss Sunshine said. 'Not me.'

'Then tell me who,' Gently said.

'I didn't see that man to talk to,' Miss Sunshine said. 'Not any time since the row.'

'But after the row,' Gently said, 'you'd be free to speak to him. You weren't afraid of Tommy then.'

'I'm just saying,' she said, 'I didn't speak to him, didn't see him. I just didn't.'

'Yet you love him,' Gently said.

Miss Sunshine gave him another stare.

'And you'd be grieving about Sonny,' Gently said. 'You'd be wanting love and consolation.'

'I didn't see him.'

'Why?' Gently said.

Miss Sunshine closed her eyes tight.

'Maybe,' she said. 'Some reason.'

Gently nodded.

'Yes,' he said.

Gently filled and lit his pipe.

Miss Sunshine sat smoothing a white glove. Her cheeks were hot. Her straight back was angled forward from the hips. She had quietly refolded her legs with scarcely a ripple from her skirt. Her head was tilted, her eyes on the glove. Her breathing was soft but a little fast.

Gently fanned smoke.

'On Wednesday,' he said.

Miss Sunshine let the glove lie.

'You decided you didn't want to see us,' Gently said. 'You left for Manchester. When?'

'About noon, I guess,' Miss Sunshine said.

'About noon,' Gently said. 'You skipped lunch.'

'Well, I had that on the train,' Miss Sunshine said. 'I thought perhaps I'd best get moving.'

'And this was on impulse,' Gently said. 'You maybe didn't even let the Quintoses know?'

'Sure, I rang them,' Miss Sunshine said.

'Before noon?'

‘Somewhere then.’

‘You rang them, you left,’ Gently said. ‘Why?’

Miss Sunshine’s eyes jumped to his.

‘I mean, in your shining innocence,’ Gently said, ‘how did you know Blackburn was dead?’

Miss Sunshine sat with her mouth a little open.

‘Perhaps you get a quick paper delivery,’ Gently said. ‘There was a paragraph in a noon edition. We’ll check what time it goes on sale. In case your impulse didn’t jump the gun.’

‘I – I did see that paper,’ Miss Sunshine said. ‘Some man brought it in to show us.’

‘Later, you’ll think of his name,’ Gently said. ‘We won’t rush it.’

Miss Sunshine hugged her thighs and said nothing.

Gently puffed.

‘So you’re on the train,’ he said. ‘Impulsively running off to Manchester. Having rung the Quintoses. Who, of course, were delighted to take you in at short notice.’

‘They’re . . . family friends,’ Miss Sunshine said.

‘That’s the impression I’m getting,’ Gently said. ‘And they’d have interests and sympathies in common. Like a recent loss of close relatives.’

‘Perhaps they lost someone,’ Miss Sunshine said.

‘Someone,’ Gently said, tapping the list.

‘Those aren’t close relatives,’ Miss Sunshine said hastily. ‘They’re Albert’s mother’s people. They never lived close.’

‘Still, they were Quintoses,’ Gently said. ‘And you might think that quantity made up for quality. And who knows if there wasn’t a close one – just one. Perhaps Albert can tell us.’

‘But I know, I’m telling you,’ Miss Sunshine said.

‘Oh, I think we’ll have to ask Albert,’ Gently said.

‘Anyway, it isn’t important,’ Miss Sunshine said.

Gently stared at her and puffed.

‘You reached Manchester,’ he said. ‘You crossed to Salford. ‘What time did you arrive at the Quintoses’?’

‘About six,’ she said.

‘Was Albert at home?’

‘Not then,’ she said. ‘He got in later.’

‘How much later?’

‘About seven, eight. Albert drives a big truck.’

‘In fact, he was just back from a trip.’

Miss Sunshine considered the glove on her knee.

‘He was back from Bristol,’ she said. ‘That’s all. He took a load down, fetched one back.’

‘Did he talk about the trip?’

‘I guess he did.’

‘About where he stayed, what he did, in Bristol?’

‘That sort of thing,’ Miss Sunshine said.

‘How he spent Tuesday evening?’

Miss Sunshine twitched the glove.

‘We can’t seem to place him Tuesday evening,’ Gently said. ‘In fact, we can’t

place him Tuesday night either. He booked a bed in Bristol but he didn't sleep in it. Bristol police are checking for us now.'

'He'd be around in Bristol,' Miss Sunshine said.

'You're sure it was Bristol?' Gently said. 'Of course we'll ask him.'

'You don't need to,' she said. 'He was out with a woman. He told me that.'

'In Bristol,' Gently said.

'Sure, Bristol.'

'Well, we'll have to be certain,' Gently said. 'We'd best talk to Albert.'

Miss Sunshine looked at Gently, dropped her eyes to the glove.

'Then there'd be a lot of other talk with the Quintoses,' Gently said. 'They'd want to know about Blackburn's death. How you came to be so much involved. If you had an alibi that would stand up.'

'We talked about it,' Miss Sunshine said.

'About Grey,' Gently said. 'You'd tell them about him. How, when all the fuss had died down, you could be his mistress quite openly.'

'I didn't talk about Grey,' Miss Sunshine said.

'Not to these close family friends?' Gently said. 'You trusted them, didn't you?'

'I didn't talk about him.'

'You surprise me,' Gently said. 'I was sure you would.'

Miss Sunshine snatched at the glove. She'd begun to shiver.

'Did you tell them about the knife?' Gently said.

'I—' Miss Sunshine said, 'I didn't know about the knife.'

'Later,' Gently said. 'After Sarah had rung you?'

'I – I might have done,' Miss Sunshine said.

'You don't remember?' Gently said.

'Yes, yes, I might have done,' Miss Sunshine said.

'We'll check with them,' Gently said. 'No doubt they'll remember.'

'Oh God, oh God,' Miss Sunshine said.

The white glove slipped to the floor.

Miss Sunshine began to cry.

The policewoman by the door shifted her position very slightly.

'Of course, we check everything,' Gently said.

'I've just had enough,' Miss Sunshine cried. 'You do what you're going to do, man. You do it! You just do it.'

'Thank you,' Gently said. 'What I intended next was for you to visit Grey.'

'No, oh no!'

'We have him here,' Gently said.

'I won't see that man. I won't!'

She sobbed passionately, her shoulders heaving, her hands hooked over her face.

'All right,' Gently said.

He rose.

'So that'll do for the present,' he said. 'We'll type a statement for you, Miss Sunshine. You can sign that later.'

'But what happens to me now?' Miss Sunshine sobbed.

'We'll find you transport to Brickfields.'

'I don't want to go there!' Miss Sunshine sobbed.

'But you will,' Gently said.

He took the phone.

CHAPTER TEN

ALL THIS WHILE Tallent had been listening with a puzzled stare in his pale eyes.

Now, when Miss Sunshine was escorted out, he jumped suddenly to his feet.

'Sir, we bloody can't do this!' he exclaimed.

Gently looked at him mildly.

'Why not?' he said.

'Because, because,' Tallent babbled, 'we can charge that bitch – but if we let her out of here, she'll louse it up for us.'

'You think she'll do that?' Gently said.

'You know she'll do it!' Tallent said. 'Twice you had her on the bloody hook, twice you let her get away with it. She'll go back there, she'll fix a witness who'll swear he showed her the noon paper. Then she'll fix Sharkey's missus about the knife, and get her story square with the Quintoses. For chrissake hold her till we've followed up, got her stupid lies nailed.'

Gently shrugged faintly.

'Maybe you weren't following,' he said.

'Yeah, like hell I wasn't following,' Tallent said. 'Let me grab her back.'

'You'd have to charge her.'

'You bet I'd charge her! And it'd stick like her own skin. Motive, weapon, opportunity, dabs, guilty knowledge – what else do we want?'

'No charge. Not yet,' Gently said.

'Oh, for crying aloud,' Tallent said. 'Do I drag her back?'

Gently shook his head.

'Lock me up,' Tallent said. 'Someone lock me up.'

He stamped up and down the office.

'Am I crazy?' he said. 'I think I'm crazy.'

'You aren't crazy,' Gently said. 'Come and sit down. Perhaps Stout will fetch us in some coffee.'

'Yeah, but I am crazy,' Tallent said. 'Ever since that dame walked in, I'm crazy. I could hear you playing her along and it wasn't jake. The sixty-four-dollar questions you didn't ask her.'

'Not my day for the hammer,' Gently said.

'But hell then, when is it?' Tallent said. 'Chummie sits there. The case is made. And you ease chummie off all the hooks.'

'Relax,' Gently said. 'Stay loose.'

'But you did,' Tallent said. 'You bloody did.'

'I did,' Gently said. 'Sit down, smoke.'

'So I have to be crazy,' Tallent said.

He threw himself heavily into a chair, jabbed a cigarette in his mouth and lit it.

'I'm not stupid,' he said. 'Not usually stupid. But that was chummie who just

walked out of here.'

Gently scraped out his pipe and made a ritual of filling it.

'You haven't been listening to an interrogation,' he said.

'No?' Tallent said. 'So what have I been listening to?'

'It was a briefing,' Gently said.

He went on being leisurely with his pipe.

Tallent fizzed smoke and stared.

'I told you yesterday,' Gently said. 'It wouldn't much matter what Miss Sunshine told us. As a matter of fact she was very informative. She confirmed a number of our hypotheses. But that wasn't so important. What was important was what I told her.'

'Yeah,' Tallent said. 'You told her plenty. You flashed every card and didn't play one.'

'I hope so,' Gently said.

'Don't bother hoping,' Tallent said. 'You handed her the answers on a plate.'

'And,' Gently said, 'she thinks she knows why.'

Tallent filled up with smoke, let it trail from his nostrils.

'So she's briefed,' Gently said. 'She's our ferret. Now we're putting her in the hole.'

Tallent nosed more smoke.

'Like that,' he said.

'Just like that,' Gently said.

'And if the rabbits run?' Tallent said.

'Makin has the place staked out,' Gently said.

'And if they don't run?' Tallent said.

'They'll run,' Gently said. 'That's a very nervous burrow down there. One whiff of our ferret and they'll run.'

Tallent stoked his lungs again.

'Maybe I am stupid,' he said. 'Like not playing in your league. So what do we do meantime?'

'We do nothing,' Gently said.

'I shouldn't have asked,' Tallent said.

'The ferret is in,' Gently said. 'The nets are placed. Now we stay quiet. Like good hunters.'

Stout brought the coffee and a plate of biscuits, then settled at a typewriter with his notebook.

Out in the M/T yard cars came and went. Their tyres hissed faintly. It was raining again.

Beyond the door of the office feet clumped in the corridor, phones rang, there were snatches of talk. Someone was marched into the room next door and for a while one could hear the drone of interrogation.

Gently smoked one pipe after another, changing from mixture to sliced plug. Tallent chain-smoked his cigarettes. Stout pecked away laboriously at Miss Sunshine's statement.

When the phone went, after an hour, it was Bristol reporting back on Albert Quintos. He'd been seen during Tuesday evening at a café in the dock area with a black woman, unidentified.

'Which about clears him,' Tallent growled. 'I never did reckon him much of a

prospect.'

'Unless the woman was Miss Sunshine,' Stout ventured rashly.

'You shut up,' Tallent said. 'You're just the stenographer.'

Outside a light sprang on in the M/T yard and showed up the puddles on the greasy concrete. Patrols were coming in. There was talk and some laughter. A distant radio was switched on for the news.

Tallent stalked about the office touching things. He pulled open a cabinet and looked at a file.

Stout finished the statement. He sat looking through the window.

Gently smoked another pipe.

'Hell, oh hell,' Tallent said at last, slamming the cabinet-drawer shut.

He looked at Gently.

'We could call Makin,' he said. 'Make sure he isn't asleep on the job.'

Gently shook his head.

'He'd have news,' Tallent said. 'Damnation, he must have seen something. Your bloody rabbits aren't running.'

Gently shrugged, drew on his pipe.

'I don't think they're going to run,' Tallent said. 'And for this we missed out on Sadie.'

'Fetch some more coffee in,' Gently said to Stout.

'But for me, arsenic,' Tallent said.

At last he went storming out of the office to return with a bundle of evening papers. He settled in a corner with them, leaning against a radiator, reading each one backwards from the sports page.

Stout also shyly brought out a newspaper, which Gently could see was the *Guardian.*

For twenty minutes the office stayed quiet.

The phone rang at 7.15.

'Fox-trot Seven.'

That was Makin. They'd hooked his call up through the board.

'Gently here,' Gently said. 'Report in, Fox-trot Seven.'

'Sharkey Sunshine has just left the Club, sir,' Makin said, his voice sounding gritty. 'He's taken his car. We're in Victoria Road, heading south towards Acton. What are your instructions, sir? Over.'

'Fox-trot Seven,' Gently said. 'Stay with him. Have you left men covering the Club? Over.'

'Yes, sir,' Makin said. 'Over.'

'Over and stand by,' Gently said.

He dropped the phone on its rest.

Tallent had come up close to listen. His face was close to Gently's.

'Sharkey,' he said. 'And he's the rabbit?'

'He's the rabbit,' Gently said.

'Yeah,' Tallent said. 'So now I'm getting it. Why pinching Sadie wasn't enough. What made you so sure?'

'Knowing Sharkey,' Gently said. 'Though Taylor could have been first rabbit.'

'Taylor,' Tallent said. 'Is he still in it?'

'Not now,' Gently said. 'Not as of that call.'

Tallent sat down slowly on a chair by the desk.

‘Next question,’ he said. ‘Where is rabbit running? Victoria Road, heading south towards Acton. Could it be he’s heading for Osgood’s flat?’

‘Not very likely,’ Gently said.

‘Too close, too obvious,’ Tallent said. ‘How about the A4 and, like, Bristol?’

‘There’s one more probable place,’ Gently said.

The phone rang again.

‘Fox-trot Seven.’

‘Report in,’ Gently said.

‘We’re in Rollo Lane, sir, still heading south. Over.’

‘Received,’ Gently said. ‘Over and stand by.’

Tallent was staring.

‘Rollo Lane,’ he said. ‘He’s coming straight at us. We could reach out and grab him.’

‘No need,’ Gently said. ‘He’s doing all right.’

‘Yeah,’ Tallent said. ‘Yeah?’

He was silent some moments. Then he said, ‘You knew.’

Gently nodded. ‘That’s why I’m sitting here.’

‘That’s why he’s sitting there,’ Tallent said.

He made his big fists rasp together.

‘I’m not on the beam, am I?’ he said. ‘You’ve got it set up and I’m not reading it.’

‘You’ll read it,’ Gently said. ‘It’ll be simple.’

‘For those kind words,’ Tallent said.

He spat.

Makin and Sharkey came in together. Sharkey stayed scowling just inside the door. Makin said, ‘Sunshine wants a word with you, sir.’

Then he quietly backed out, closing the door after him.

For a while Sharkey didn’t move. He stood very straight, his eyes on Gently. He wore no coat, as though he’d left in a hurry. Rain gleamed like sweat on his black hair.

He said throatily, ‘You said I’d be coming to you, man.’

Then he stepped forward in front of the desk.

He looked down at Gently. His eyes were dull.

‘You didn’t leave no other way, man, did you?’ he said.

‘Give Mr Sunshine a chair,’ Gently said to Stout.

Stout sprang up and placed one. Sharkey sat. He sat upright, his hands flat on his knees, his face hard-shadowed by the strip-light above him.

Gently leaned back, watching Sharkey.

‘This is about your sister, isn’t it?’ he said.

‘You darned well know it is, you man,’ Sharkey said. ‘You been asking her questions till you made her hysterical.’

‘Scarcely hysterical,’ Gently said.

‘Hysterical,’ Sharkey said. ‘She was howling like a kid. And none of that necessary. She ain’t who you want. You don’t have nothing sure on Sadie at all.’

‘Who do I want, then?’ Gently said.

‘Not Sadie,’ Sharkey said. ‘You don’t want her.’

‘That’s not how it looks to me,’ Gently said. ‘I do want her. And very soon now I’ll probably have her.’

‘But she ain’t the one!’

Sharkey’s hand flicked out.

‘See, man, I can prove it. She’s home all the evening. You just got out of Sarah Sadie’s not in her room, and that sure is the truth. But she’s only in the john.’

‘Very possible,’ Gently said.

‘Yeh, possible,’ Sharkey said. ‘She got tummy trouble, remember? She’s in and out that john all the time, I saw her myself, I know she’s there.’

‘You saw her, Sarah didn’t,’ Gently said.

‘Yeh, I saw her,’ Sharkey said. ‘I’ll swear it.’

‘And what will Sarah do?’ Gently said.

Sharkey hesitated.

‘That’s no account,’ he said. ‘I’m going to swear.’

Gently sighed.

‘You’re a good brother,’ he said. ‘You’re not going to let perjury stand in your way. And now you’re launched you may as well make a job of it. How did Sadie learn that Blackburn was dead?’

‘Man, all this is true!’ Sharkey said.

‘Oh, never mind,’ Gently said. ‘Answer the question.’

Sharkey’s hands curled, paled at the knuckles, suddenly relaxed again on his knees.

‘I just told her,’ he said.

‘*You* just told her.’

‘I just told her,’ Sharkey said. ‘That’s how she knew. I gone down to the shops to fetch our supplies, and I pick up a paper, read it there.’

‘Which paper?’ Gently said.

‘I ain’t sure which paper.’

‘What time did you buy it?’

‘I ain’t sure what time.’

‘Where was it in the paper?’

‘I ain’t—’ Sharkey said.

‘And you’ll swear to this too?’ Gently said.

Sharkey was silent.

‘Of course, she may have heard it from you,’ Gently said. ‘And you may have read it in the paper. And the paper may have arrived in Brickfields about two minutes after it hit the street. And you may simultaneously have bought, read it, driven back from the shops, passed the news on to Sadie. And she may instantly have packed and left. It could happen. On TV.’

‘Man, that’s the way—’

‘Now the knife, Gently said. ‘Something original about the knife. I didn’t see Sarah phoning last night, nor do I think she was much in the mood.’

‘I phoned—’

‘We’ll check,’ Gently said.

‘I went to a box,’ Sharkey said. ‘I phoned.’

‘What’s wrong with your phone?’ Gently said.

‘Man, I just knew you’d tapped it!’ Sharkey said.

‘You phoned trunk from a box?’

‘I did that!’

‘Why?’ Gently said. ‘What was important?’

‘I’m just ringing Sadie—’

‘Just saying hallo.’

‘Just ringing her,’ Sharkey said. ‘Ringing her.’

‘Who knows?’ Gently said. ‘That could be true too. Though Sadie said it was Sarah rang her. But late at night, a bad line. Maybe Sadie mistook the voice.’

‘It was me,’ Sharkey said. ‘Me, me.’

‘We’ll check with the Quintoses,’ Gently said. ‘Let’s get on to Sadie and Grey, how you can prove they’re not lovers.’

Sharkey rocked a little, his lips twisting.

‘Ain’t no other way, man,’ he said. ‘That’s what you’s telling me.’

‘Sadie knew,’ Gently said. ‘No papers. No phone calls.’

‘That’s what you’s telling me,’ Sharkey said.

He went on rocking.

‘You told her,’ Gently said.

‘I told her,’ Sharkey said. ‘I told Sarah.’

‘But Tuesday night.’

‘Tuesday night.’

‘I have to warn you,’ Gently said.

The phone rang.

* * *

Gently took up the phone.

‘Fox-trot Four.’

‘Come in, Fox-trot Four,’ Gently said. ‘Over.’

‘Miss Sunshine has just left the Club in a taxi, sir. We’re following them along Victoria Road, heading south. Over.’

‘Fox-trot Four,’ Gently said. ‘Follow them in. Over.

‘Message received,’ patrol said. ‘Over.’

‘Over and stand by,’ Gently said.

He hung up.

Sharkey was watching him.

‘I’ll repeat what I was saying to you,’ Gently said. ‘What you say now will be taken down in writing and may be used in evidence. Is that clear?

‘That’s clear, man,’ Sharkey said. ‘You’s mighty fair. Put that down.’

‘Right,’ Gently said. ‘We’ll continue. You told your sister and your wife on Tuesday night.’

Sharkey eased forward, pressing on his knees.

‘I ain’t going to justify it any,’ he said. ‘I had ’bout all I could take from Tommy, and I just went crazed. That’s all I can tell you.’

‘Did something happen on Tuesday?’

Sharkey pulled at his beard.

‘Yeh,’ he said. ‘You can say something happened. I just got a letter Sonny posted before he sailed. When he was alive. It reached me Tuesday. And that was a lie I said about Tommy and the ship. I knew he was responsible, I’d talked to Grey. Then Tuesday evening Tommy was kidding with Sarah like nothing had happened. And I flipped.’

‘Go on,’ Gently said.

‘I followed him home. I knew he’d have a whore there, him leaving early. I parked in the road, let him go up, gave him time to get in a clinch.’

‘You parked where?’

‘Right in the road, man. He didn’t know I was on his tail.’

‘Did you see anyone there who might identify you?’

‘No man, nobody. The road was empty.’

Tallent made a noise.

Sharkey slid him a look.

‘I ain’t saying there wasn’t nobody there,’ he said. ‘But I didn’t notice nobody. I was watching Tommy. I didn’t see any person in that road.’

‘So you waited,’ Gently said. ‘What happened then?’

‘I went in round the back way,’ Sharkey said. ‘Between the houses. There’s some outside steps go up to the kitchen. That’s the way I got in.’

‘Wasn’t the door locked?’

‘Sure,’ Sharkey said. ‘But I got a knife with me, remember?’

‘What about the mortice lock?’

Sharkey hesitated.

‘There ain’t one,’ he said. ‘Or it wasn’t locked.’

‘Go on,’ Gently said.

Sharkey pressed on his knees, seemed to be moulding them together.

‘I went in,’ he said. ‘They was on the bed. I let him have it in the back.’

‘Who was the woman?’

‘I didn’t know her,’ Sharkey said.

‘You saw her?’

‘Yeh, man.’

‘Though it was dark?’

‘It ain’t quite dark,’ Sharkey said. ‘Not quite dark. There’s some sort of light. Maybe it’s the electric fire.’

‘Blackburn’s flat is centrally heated,’ Gently said.

‘There’s light,’ Sharkey said. ‘Maybe it come through the window.’

‘Enough light for you to see this woman was a stranger?’

‘Yeh, man,’ Sharkey said.

‘Go on.’

‘So that’s about all,’ Sharkey said. ‘I went out there fast. I jumped in my car and drove back home. I’m maybe gone about an hour, but ain’t going to be nobody notice that.’

‘You stabbed him and went.’

‘That’s about it.’

‘So your dabs will be on the knife,’ Gently said.

‘Dabs,’ Sharkey said. ‘There ain’t no dabs. I’m wearing my gloves all this time.’

‘I see,’ Gently said. ‘Did Blackburn scream?’

‘No, man. He’s dead straight away.’

‘Why stab him twice, then?’

‘I don’t know why I do it.’

‘But you stabbed him twice.’

‘Maybe,’ Sharkey said.

Tallent scraped his chair, grabbed a cigarette, threw a hard stare at Sharkey.

‘You just don’t know what you do,’ Sharkey said. ‘It’s like a kind of blackout. I’m doing my best to remember.’

‘This woman,’ Gently said.

Sharkey hung to his knees.

'Where was she when you entered the room?'

'Man, she's on the bed,' Sharkey said. 'They's both on the bed. She's underneath him. That's the way.'

'You were able to see this?'

'Don't I say so?'

'You were able to see her?'

'Yeh, man. Yeh.'

'Though she was beneath Blackburn?'

'Yeh. I can see her.'

'Well enough to know she was a stranger?'

'I did know that,' Sharkey said.

'Then you approach the bed,' Gently said. 'You can see her. Doesn't she see you?'

'Man, she ain't seeing,' Sharkey said. 'She got her eyes closed. She don't see me.'

'So you stab him,' Gently said. 'Is she still insensible?'

'I don't know, I don't wait,' Sharkey said.

'While you stab him twice,' Gently said.

'I just don't know, man. It's all like a nightmare. I don't know.'

'But you'll know this,' Gently said, 'since you saw her so well. Was she a white woman?'

'She, she—' Sharkey said, 'she's a white woman.'

'So she couldn't have been Sadie?'

Sharkey dropped his head.

'Well,' Gently said, 'I'm glad that's established, your sister being under such grave suspicion. Now we'll be able to relieve her mind when she walks through that door.'

Sharkey jolted upright.

'You don't need her here, man!'

'She seems to think otherwise,' Gently said.

Out in the hall there'd been voices and footfalls.

Now there came a rap on the door.

Sadie Sunshine came in.

Sharkey Sunshine jumped up.

They stood facing each other in front of the desk.

Seen together, there was no mistaking the kinship between the two fine-featured faces. She was nearly as tall as he. They made matching male and female figures. She was elegant, he was powerful, each with a natural grace of carriage.

'You, woman,' he said from deep in his chest. 'You keep your mouth shut, you woman.'

'You, man,' Sadie Sunshine said. 'Who you think you telling, you, man?'

'This ain't your affair,' Sharkey Sunshine said. 'You just do what I'm saying, you, woman.'

'This my affair too,' Sadie Sunshine said. 'You a big fool, Sharkey Sunshine, you, man.'

She turned impetuously to Gently.

'You don't listen to this man,' she said. 'He has an idea in his head that he ought

to protect me. I don't need protecting by him.'

'You, woman, be quiet,' Sharkey Sunshine said.

'Oh no,' Sadie Sunshine said. 'Oh no. You've told these policemen your story, Sharkey. Now you just let me tell them mine.'

'I've confessed, you, woman.'

Sadie Sunshine laughed.

'And you think they believed you, you fool man?'

'I killed Blackburn,' Sharkey Sunshine said. 'I killed him.'

'Man, you weren't even near the place.'

She took the chair Sharkey had sat in, folded her long legs neatly together. She laid her bag and her gloves on her lap. She met Gently's eyes firmly.

'I was the woman with Blackburn,' she said. 'I went to his flat to make it up with him. He was in my arms when he died. I saw the man: it wasn't Sharkey.'

'Oh, you fool, woman!' Sharkey groaned.

'This is very interesting,' Gently said. 'So who was it?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'We didn't have the light on. But it wasn't Sharkey. He didn't have a beard.'

'You could see that?'

'Yes,' she said. 'I could see that. I could see his silhouette against the curtains. And it wasn't Sharkey. It was a shorter man. It was a man with a very short neck.'

'Who you didn't know.'

'Who I didn't know. I'm not even sure he was black.

'And he just stabbed Blackburn and ran.'

'Yes,' she said. 'Stabbed him and ran.'

She sat very still, slightly smiling, eyes large and unwinking.

Sharkey towered over her chair, scowling down, a hand on the chair-back.

'So,' Gently said, 'you claim to be an eye-witness.'

'I sure was that,' Sadie Sunshine said.

'You saw the murderer, saw the blows struck.'

'I could feel them.'

She blinked her eyes.

'Did you scream?'

'I guessed I screamed. Maybe that's why he left so fast.'

'Leaving you pinned down by Blackburn's body.'

'Don't remind me of that,' she said.

'Of course, you'd be terrified,' Gently said. 'Left in that situation with a murdered man. In the dark as you were. With blood pouring over you. What did you do?'

She laughed nervously.

'I guess I got out from under.'

'What about the blood?'

'I sluiced it off in the shower. I was in my birthday-suit, remember.'

'That's curious,' Gently said. 'We didn't find any blood-traces other than those on the bed. And Blackburn bled quite freely. And all this happened in the dark.'

'I guess I didn't get so much on me,' Sadie Sunshine said. 'I was sliding out of that pretty quick. I switched the light on as soon as I reached it, saw I had some smudges down the side.'

'Did it call for a shower to remove those?'

'I thought it had better be a shower,' she said.

‘Wouldn’t you be in a hurry to leave there?’ Gently said.

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I got in the shower.’

‘Going back to the attack,’ Gently said. ‘You could see the attacker, you could feel two blows.’

‘Two blows,’ she said, ‘very quick. Then I was screaming and he ran out.’

‘He didn’t hesitate.’

‘He didn’t hesitate.’

‘So it couldn’t have been him who wiped the knife-handle.’

Sadie Sunshine’s eyes didn’t blink.

‘No,’ she said. ‘I did that afterwards.’

‘You,’ Gently said.

‘It was naughty,’ she said. ‘I know I shouldn’t have done that. But I recognized the knife. It meant it was one of our people. So I gave it a wipe with my hankie.’

‘Why didn’t you take it?’

She made a face.

‘I wasn’t going to pull it out,’ she said. ‘It was only a cheap, common sort of knife. I sure didn’t think you’d ever trace it.’

‘You kept a cool head,’ Gently said.

‘Not me,’ she said. ‘I was in an all-ways tizzie. But I had to wash and dress, I couldn’t just run, so I guess I cooled a bit in the process.’

‘It was then you thought to wipe the knife-handle.’

‘The knife-handle, the doors, things I’d touched.’

‘And when you did something else.’

‘Maybe,’ she said.

‘Concerning Blackburn’s wallet.’

‘The wallet,’ she said.

Gently stared at the ceiling.

‘The wallet,’ he said, ‘was in Blackburn’s jacket, which hung over a chair. The murderer didn’t have time to go through it, but someone did. It was empty.’

Sadie Sunshine repeated her nervous laugh.

‘All right,’ she said. ‘I’ll come clean. I took his money. He owed me that much. And he surely didn’t have any more use for it.’

‘How much?’ Gently said.

‘Oh . . . about fifty.’

‘Mostly in fivers?’ Gently said.

‘Mostly in fivers,’ she said. ‘A few ones.’

‘Miss Sunshine,’ Gently said to the ceiling, ‘you’re a liar.’

He came up suddenly from his chair.

‘You’re liars, both of you,’ he said. ‘Neither of you was in that flat on Tuesday evening. Neither of you was in Chiswick.’

‘Man, that ain’t so—’ Sharkey began.

‘You,’ Gently said, ‘never left the Club.’

‘I did!’

‘You didn’t,’ Gently said. ‘You couldn’t leave it for an hour and nobody notice. You’re a figurehead there. You’re the MC. You leave a gap when you go out. And you didn’t go out. Your customers say so. Who served the band at 10 p.m.?’

‘I—’ Sharkey said.

Gently turned to Sadie.

'You were in Acton,' he said. 'With James Osgood.'

'I never was!'

'Oh yes,' Gently said. 'You were giving him a whirl to spite Blackburn. It was a bad alibi, so you didn't give it. Osgood had reason to settle with Blackburn. It was a bad alibi for Osgood too. You were hot. You wouldn't do.'

'But this is crazy—!'

'Stop lying,' Gently said. 'You two are covering, but not for each other. You're covering for the woman who is Grey's mistress. Who borrowed Sadie's bonnet. Who couldn't run.'

'Oh man, we ain't—!' Sharkey cried.

'Who propositioned Blackburn,' Gently said. 'Who was waiting in his flat for him on Tuesday. Who killed him with a knife taken from Sadie's bedroom.'

'Oh God, my God!' Sharkey cried.

'So don't let's waste each other's time,' Gently said.

He picked up the paperweight, let it drop with a bang.

'I knew this yesterday,' he said.

Sharkey reached over the desk, grabbed Gently's arm.

'But why you think this, man,' he cried. 'Why you think little Sarah kill him? She don't have any reason at all.'

'Tell me her maiden name,' Gently said.

'Her maiden name—!'

'Isn't it Quintos?'

Sharkey gazed, lips trembling.

'Sarah Quintos,' Gently said.

He pushed the Immigration Department list towards Sharkey.

'You lost a brother,' he said. 'One. She lost brothers, sisters, father, mother, a grandparent: her all. She didn't have anyone left but you.'

Gently snatched his arm from Sharkey's grasp.

'And yesterday she didn't have you either,' he said. 'After you'd guessed about Grey.'

'Oh, oh,' Sharkey sobbed.

He slid down on the front of the desk.

'It's true,' he sobbed. 'Oh, I been cruel. I didn't know I could be so cruel.'

Sadie Sunshine sat very pale.

'She'd have told you,' Gently said to her. 'You knew about Grey. That's why you ran. So we'd suspect you. So we wouldn't bother much with Mrs Sunshine.'

Sadie Sunshine said, 'It was Grey.'

'Yes,' Gently said. 'Grey. Perhaps even losing her whole family wouldn't have turned Sarah into a killer. And unless she talks we can't touch him.'

'He'll need to watch out,' Sadie Sunshine said.

'I'm afraid he's good at that,' Gently said.

Sadie Sunshine didn't say anything.

Gently shrugged.

'Right,' he said to Tallent. 'Time to go out and bring her in.'

'No, man!' Sharkey cried, jumping up. 'You cain't do that, sir – you cain't.'

'I must,' Gently said.

'No,' Sharkey cried.

He went down on one knee before Gently.

'Let me fetch her. Oh, please. She ain't going to give nobody any trouble.'

'It's my duty,' Gently said.

'She'll be frightened, sir. Please. Please.'

Gently paused.

'You come with us,' he said. 'We'll let you talk to her first.'

Tallent hooked up the phone, said, 'I'll inform Division. Do you reckon we need help?'

'No,' Gently said. 'It's just a family affair.'

Sadie Sunshine caught Sharkey's hand.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE RAIN HAD left the air softly chill and the night sky like blue-black plush. Tyres still swished in the gleaming streets and lamps shone with a deep brilliance.

They'd taken a Super Snipe. Tallent drove, Gently sat by Tallent. In the back the two Sunshines shared with the grey-eyed policewoman, whose name was Grady.

Nobody spoke. Tallent drove swiftly, touching his siren for the lights.

When they reached the junction of Paradise Road they found a patrol Wolseley parked opposite.

Tallent drifted the Super Snipe in behind it and Makin came to Gently's window.

'There could be trouble, sir,' Makin said. 'There's forty or fifty immigrants outside the Club.'

'Doing what?' Tallent growled.

'Just hanging about,' Makin said. 'I took a shufti but I didn't go near them. I thought I'd talk to you first.'

'Do you know about this?' Gently said to Sharkey.

'No,' Sharkey muttered. 'It ain't my arranging.'

'Maybe now we call help in?' Tallent said.

Gently shook his head. 'No,' he said.

'But look,' Tallent said. 'This could be a bloody slaughter. They're bound to jump us if that woman kicks up.'

'That's a risk we take,' Gently said, 'with any arrest. We'll have to take it here. Keep driving.'

'Yeah,' Tallent said. 'Now let me pray.'

He wheeled the Super Snipe off the kerb. As they turned into Paradise Road their headlights picked up the black youths grouped together near the Club steps. Tallent drove hard towards the steps, then braked the car to a screeching stop. The crowd pulled apart, giving the car space, but didn't move far from the steps.

'Cut your headlights,' Gently said.

Tallent cut them. Gently got out, walked up to the steps. At the top of the steps stood the bouncer, Josh, and a man who was holding half a brick.

'Remember me?' Gently said to Josh.

'Yeh, man,' Josh said. 'I remember you.'

'So let's stay friends,' Gently said. 'Come down and let me get on with my job.'

'Maybe we don't like your job,' Josh said.

'Maybe I don't either,' Gently said.

He walked up the steps, stood level with the men.

'Are you planning to attack me?' he said.

The man with the brick didn't want to look at Gently.

Josh kept looking, didn't move.

'Well?' Gently said.

‘We ain’t planning to attack you,’ Josh said. ‘Just we don’t like what you come here to do.’

‘So come down,’ Gently said.

He reached for the brick. The man holding the brick let him take it. Gently turned, came down the steps. Josh came down the steps. The other man followed.

The rest of the crowd had drawn round the car where Tallent now leaned, stroking his knuckles. They were silent. They stared at Tallent. Tallent whistled softly, gazing over their heads.

‘Right, you go in now,’ Gently said to Sharkey.

Sharkey got out. Sadie stayed in the car.

Sharkey stood by the car a moment, his eyes wild, then he stumbled up the steps and unlocked the doors.

‘We go in too?’ Tallent said.

‘No,’ Gently said. ‘We wait.’

Sharkey pushed through the doors, leaving them wide. He pushed through the swing doors. A light flared on.

‘No other lights,’ Tallent murmured.

He nodded to the windows apart from the hall.

Sadie said from the car, ‘She’s surely in there. Sarah wouldn’t run away like me.’

‘Yeah,’ Tallent said.

He resumed his whistling.

Now some of the crowd were whispering together.

A train went very slowly by, backed up, went slowly by a second time.

Then the spring doors squeaked and Sharkey lurched out, a bundle sagging in his arms. He stood swaying on the steps, making choking noises. The bundle he carried was Sarah Sunshine.

‘My God, he’s killed her!’ Tallent gaped.

Sharkey sank on the steps, tears squeezing from his eyes.

Sarah’s head dangled heavy, her small teeth showing.

Through his sobs Sharkey choked, ‘Hung. She’m hung.’

‘Keep back, keep back!’ Gently snapped at the crowd as they hustled round him at the foot of the steps.

In Sarah’s neck was a deep, fresh weal. An envelope was pinned to the breast of her dress.

She was warm, but she was dead. Her mouth, her eyes were slightly open. Perhaps at the last she’d snatched at the noose, since a nail was torn and the finger bleeding.

‘Oh, she’m hung,’ Sharkey sobbed, and those gathered round him gave a rustling moan.

Sadie Sunshine clawed free of the mob to throw herself weeping on her brother’s shoulder.

‘Give me some light here!’ Gently snapped to Tallent.

Tallent bulled his way through with a service handlamp.

Gently unpinned the envelope, shook out the contents, poked open a folded sheet with one finger. The writing on it was uneven and scattered, as though blown through by the wind.

I sory, the note read, *Key man I know you dont love me eny more now I bad to you I sory if they come for me that is truble for us peeple I have to be brave Key man*

maybe we meet agn sumplace Key man I did love you I sory man.

The last words tailed away and the note was unsigned.

In Tallent's hand the lamp wavered.

'Oh Christ,' he muttered.

He switched the lamp to her upturned face. The eyes glittered faintly through the lashes, the mouth was parted like a dead animal's, the smooth cheeks had no expression.

'She'm hung,' Sharkey sobbed. 'Oh why?'

'That bloody bitch,' Tallent said.

'Come on,' Gently said. 'Let's get things moving.'

'Bloody,' Tallent said. 'Bloody.'

It was late, very late in Tallent's office, and Tallent had smoked too many cigarettes.

Empty coffee cups were piled on his desk and smoke hung on the hot air in slanting bands.

Twice Gently had risen to go, twice Tallent had held him back.

Makin sat in his raincoat, stifling yawns. Stout was hunched against a radiator, probably dozing.

'Look,' Tallent was saying. 'I still don't love black people. I'll live and die not loving black people. I don't love them, big period, and I don't expect them to love me.'

Gently hesitated, once more at the door.

'So why bother loving them?' he said flatly.

'Yeah, but I'm supposed to love them,' Tallent said. 'Not loving them makes me a bastard.'

'They don't want you to love them,' Gently said.

'Never mind what they want,' Tallent said.

Gently leaned on the door.

'Leave love out,' he said. 'Love and hate are joined down the middle.'

'Yeah?' Tallent said.

'Two sides,' Gently said. 'One coin. They come together.'

'Maybe so,' Tallent said.

'You walk down the street,' Gently said. 'You don't love the people. You don't hate the people. Coming and going, just people. If one of them trips you help him up, maybe give him a brush down. Then you forget him and keep walking. No question of love and hate.'

'Yeah, but that's too easy,' Tallent said.

'So why make it hard?' Gently said. 'Leave it alone. Let be. Tampering with love is a Christian heresy.'

'You mean, sort of loving by not-loving,' Stout murmured dreamily from his radiator.

'You go to sleep, sonny,' Tallent said. 'Leave the big questions to the big men.'

He stubbed the last of his too-many cigarettes.

'Yeah, but see here,' he began.

Then he squinted across the smoky room.

The door had closed.

Gently was gone.

Osgood received eighteen months on the Immigration Act charge. Grey pleaded

ignorance of the offences and his counsel gained him an acquittal.

As he was leaving court by the rear entrance he ran into some reporters and other people. He was heard to scream. He collapsed. A cheap sheath-knife was found buried in his back.

The case was very carefully investigated and one Albert Quintos assisted the police. But nothing definite was ever proved.

Except Grey's alibi, of course.